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# Reevaluating Islamist electoral success and participation in government

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## Abstract

Under what conditions will Islamist parties perform well in elections and what happens to the political regime should they gain political power? The canonical hypothesis—“one man, one vote, one time”—argues that Islamist parties are likely to perform well whenever elections become free and that their electoral success is likely to lead to a democratic backslide. Others argue that Islamists are not as popular as this hypothesis suggests or that only moderate Islamist parties are likely to perform well and these parties are unlikely to deliberalize a regime. I propose a modification to these hypotheses, and argue that participation in governments, not seat shares, should be conceptualized as electoral success. Furthermore, because they are often the most likely groups to face repression, the presence of Islamists in governments is indicative of a liberalizing process. Using electoral data from across the Muslim-majority world, I find that Islamists are more likely to hold cabinet-level positions as regimes become more competitive and that the presence of Islamists in government has a positive effect on future levels of democracy, broadly defined. These findings suggest a need to reevaluate more critical perspectives on the effect of Islamist participation in democratizing countries in the Muslim-majority world.

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**KEYWORDS**

democracy, Islamist parties, Islamists

**1 | INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>**

Two central debates in the study of Islamist political parties include (1) when do Islamists succeed in electoral competitions and (2) what are the regime-level implications of Islamist electoral success. A dominant assumption about Islamist participation in electoral politics argues both that Islamists are likely to be highly successful in the immediate aftermath of regime liberalization and that their electoral success will lead to the creation of a new deliberated form of governance. This hypothesis—grounded in the experiences of Islamist authoritarianism in Iran and Islamist insurgency Algeria—is sometimes referred to as the “one person, one vote, one time” hypothesis. More recently, alternative hypotheses argue that Islamist parties are unlikely to see large victories in open elections (Kurzman & Naqvi, 2010; Kurzman & Türkoğlu, 2015), or that their electoral successes are conditional on their adoption of a moderate electoral manifesto (Yildirim & Lancaster, 2015).

A simple observation suggests that these hypotheses need to be reevaluated: Islamist parties have, on average, captured no more than 13% of the seats in national legislatures across the Muslim-majority world since 1955. These parties have participated in about 30% of governments where they have competed in elections during the same time period, but they have only used elections to form single-party governments in two cases: Turkey since 2002 and Egypt from 2012 to 2013. In all other cases, Islamist party participation in government was in a coalition with non-Islamist parties. Therefore, despite often relatively poor performance in elections, Islamists frequently have opportunities to wield executive powers. Does Islamist participation in government foster or hinder democracy? Below I elaborate an argument that this participation is strong evidence of increasing levels of democracy, and offer statistical evidence that, on a variety of dimensions, regimes become more democratic as Islamists participate in governments.

**2 | “ONE PERSON, ONE VOTE, ONE TIME” AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF A PESSIMISTIC VISION OF ISLAMIST PARTIES**

In 1991, Algeria held their first ever multiparty national elections. A broad coalition of Islamist groups had formed the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) to contest the elections, and after the first round of votes were tallied, it was clear that the FIS were going to win a majority of seats in the legislature. The Algerian military forced President Bendjadid—who had fiercely advocated for political liberalization—to resign and canceled the second stage of the parliamentary election (Viorst, 1997). Speaking in 1992, and in part responding to the United States' condoning of the coup, American diplomat Edward Djerejian said, “we are suspect of those who would use the democratic process to come to power, only to destroy that very process to retain power and political dominance. While we believe in the principle of ‘one person, one vote,’ we do not support ‘one person, one vote, one time” (Djerejian, 1992). This is a direct reference to the fear that Islamist parties might use their popularity after a long spell of autocratic rule to win

control of a government through democratic elections only to close the political space, consolidate power, and institute a new form of autocratic rule.

The perception that Islamist groups might be particularly willing to conceal their autocratic ambitions to win support from a larger swath of the population is an artifact of Islamist behavior in the Iranian revolution from 1978 to 1979. The Iranian Revolution was focused on toppling a brutal and deeply unpopular monarchy and it capitalized on the popularity of the exiled cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Ervand Abrahamian (1979) identified five unique ideological groups within the Iranian revolutionary movement: the religious conservatives, the religious radicals, the religious reactionaries, the secular reformers, and the secular radicals. All of these groups shared a common goal of ending Iran's monarchy, but each had a different idea about what the postrevolutionary political regime should look like. Importantly each of these groups also saw Khomeini as the undisputed symbolic leader of the revolution, even among the secular groups who could not help but embrace the rise in religious revivalism that accompanied the rise in dissatisfaction with the Shah (Abrahamian, 1979; p. 8). This symbolic leadership enabled Khomeini to sideline his ideological opponents and consolidate a new regime built upon his own idiosyncratic and highly authoritarian interpretation of Islamic political leadership, and the image of the brutally repressive Islamic Republic of Iran came to represent the nature and ambitions of Islamist groups everywhere. Compounded by the hostage crisis in the American embassy in Tehran, Khomeini's Islamic Republic convinced a generation of onlookers that Islamist rule would mean a new form of authoritarianism and violence that would limit Western access to strategic interests and foster anti-Western—including antidemocratic—ideologies.

An updated version of the “one person, one vote, one time” hypothesis is embedded in one explanation of the aftermath of the 2010–2012 Arab uprisings. These protests movements were quickly dubbed the “Arab Spring” in reference to the expectation that new democratic life was emerging from decades of authoritarian slumber. However, as Islamist parties began to form and win elections, some commentators began to suggest that the “Arab Spring” was being followed by an “Islamist Winter,” a new form of authoritarianism that would capitalize on new democratic openings and then plunge the region into a renewed period of autocratic rule (Israeli, 2013; Sneh, 2012).

There is anecdotal evidence that Islamist parties tend to violate democratic standards. Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) comes from a history of Islamist opposition to Turkish secularism and it has spent its nearly 20 years in power—power gained through democratic elections—slowly eroding the institutional integrity of the Turkish state. President Erdogan has pushed for a system in which he can sideline parliamentary oversight and has overseen a campaign that has limited the freedoms of his political opponents as well as academic and journalistic onlookers. Islamist parties in Sudan have consistently legitimated brutal repression and even genocide. At the subnational level, Islamist rule in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province led to policies that the Pakistani Supreme Court deemed unconstitutional because of the limitations of freedoms and the creation of a religious police to enforce religious standards.

Since the 1990s—and especially following the Arab uprisings—further academic work has built a number of responses to the “one person, one vote, one time” hypothesis. One line of research argues that Islamist parties are not popular, win only small shares of seats, and are thus not meaningful threats to democracy (Kurzman & Naqvi, 2010; Kurzman & Türkoğlu, 2015). In the immediate aftermath of the Arab uprisings, the perception that Islamist parties were poised to reap large electoral victories and that these victories would spell

the end of civil rights and tolerance wherever they happened was rampant (Hamid, 2011; Israeli, 2013; Kurzman, 2012).

However, a closer look at the electoral outcomes after the Arab uprisings shows that religious parties in the Muslim majority world are unlikely to win more than a small fraction of seats in parliaments (Kurzman & Türkoğlu, 2015).

More nuanced responses to the “one person, one vote, one time” hypothesis condition their expectations about Islamist party electoral success on various ideological and structural conditions of the parties and states in question. Building upon the “one person, one vote, one time” hypothesis, one strand of this broader literature argues that “first elections” offer Islamist parties particular opportunities to do well in electoral contests because Islamist parties are often branches of broader social and religious movements that have built reputations of credibility, anticorruption, and service provision on which they can capitalize in newly liberalized regimes (Brown, 2012; Cammett & Luong, 2014). This literature remains agnostic about the full implications of the “one person, one vote, one time” hypothesis and simply attempts to explain the phenomenon that Islamist parties often do well in first elections but that support for them in subsequent competitions may decline.

Relatedly, it may be that only Islamist parties that are the least likely to violate democratic norms succeed in elections. A body of literature on Islamist participation aims to understand the conditions under which Islamist groups will embrace various elements of democratic participation including tolerance for opposition, the use of electoral institutions, and respect for civil liberties (Cavatorta & Merone, 2013; Clark, 2006; Schwedler, 2006, 2011; Tezcür, 2010). Whether this moderation contributes to success in elections has been hotly debated. On the one hand, moderation in the context of repressive authoritarian regimes may cause popular support to diminish as voters see moderation as alignment with the incumbent authoritarians (Tezcür, 2010). On the other hand, moderation in the context of more competitive elections may indicate a broader acceptance of democratic norms and appeal to voters (Schwedler, 2011; Yildirim & Lancaster, 2015). Importantly, there is relatively little consensus as to what “moderation” entails in the context of Islamist politics. Various scholars have conceptualized moderation as a cessation of violent confrontation (Ashour, 2009), ideological and behavioral shifts toward tolerance and pluralism (Schwedler, 2011), more robust participation in electoral politics (Karakaya & Yildirim, 2013), and discursive transformations in the standards for Islamic legal interpretations (Yenigün, 2016).

Other scholars have emphasized the role of ideological moderation among Islamist parties as a prerequisite for electoral success. The same conceptual problem exists in this body of literature: moderation is poorly defined. Leaving that debate, it may be that the elusive “median voter” is best captured by Islamist moderates, thus we should see more electoral success among more moderate Islamist parties (Yildirim & Lancaster, 2015). The electoral successes of Turkey’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) and Tunisia’s Ennahda party have become canonical case studies of this process. In both cases, histories of electoral failure and/or exclusion from the political process prompted a recalculation of electoral priorities that included a more full-throated embrace of democratic norms (Altunisik, 2005; Cavatorta & Merone, 2013; Grewal, 2020; Mecham, 2004; Netterstrøm, 2015). In both cases, the emergence of these more democratic positions coincided with structural opportunities for competitive electoral contests that ultimately brought the newly moderated Islamists into power. Thus, it appears that both ideological shifts and regime-level political liberalization reinforce the process of Islamist electoral success.

A final strain of scholarship that has examined support for Islamist parties has emphasized the economic conditions in which Islamist parties compete. Islamist parties may be able to signal to their potential supporters a dedication to good policy-making simply by making appeals to Islam; in other words, Islam can serve as a proxy for an established party platform, especially under conditions of economic hardship (Pepinsky et al., 2012). Additionally, it may be that economic hardships push supporters of Islamist parties to hope for a more egalitarian afterlife that may be more accessible if they support Islamist parties (Grewal et al., 2019). Whether through their reputations of anticorruption or through the genuine faith of their supporters, Islamist parties seem to benefit electorally from economic downturns (Masoud, 2014; Tessler, 1997).

### 3 | TOWARD A THEORY OF ISLAMIST ELECTORAL SUCCESS AND DEMOCRATIZATION

Two observations deserve much more serious discussion than they received in the literature reviewed above. First, Islamist parties do not need to capture a plurality of legislative seats to wield political power. Second, because Islamist groups are often the strongest opponents to established authoritarian rule, and their political activities are frequently the targets of authoritarian repression, it seems intuitive to consider Islamist electoral success—either measured in terms of seat shares or presence in government—as evidence of at least authoritarian breakdown, if not democratization (Blaydes & Lo, 2011; p. 116). I will consider each of these observations in turn to build a more nuanced theory of the relationship between Islamist electoral success and democratization.

I begin by considering the observation that Islamist parties are able to wield political power without large victories in legislative elections. Particularly following long periods of authoritarian rule, Islamist parties may make credible coalition partners with secular nationalist parties because they both aim to keep the former incumbents out of power. Following the logic of coalition theories in democratic governments, Islamist parties may be able to make credible policy promises when they are assigned cabinet portfolios that align with their reputations (Lavar & Shepsle, 1990). Islamist parties have served in about 20% of governing coalitions where they competed in elections since 1960 despite averaging less than 10% of the seats in national legislatures over the same time period. Islamist parties surely know that winning more legislative seats is not the only way to influence political outcomes, and so they may coordinate their political project to build a reputation that enables them to hold executive offices even at the expense of legislative seats. Therefore, examining Islamist electoral success entirely as a seat share seems to be an inadequate empirical approach.

Indeed, a burgeoning literature suggests that Islamist parties balance social service provision with political ambition in ways that include consciously limiting the number of legislative seats they win. Before the Arab uprisings rocked the Arab world and the world of Arab political science, Nathan Brown (2012) argued that Islamist parties in the Middle East faced particular institutional constraints that limited their incentives to try to win large blocs of legislative seats. Operating in less than democratic regimes, Islamists face the threat that their electoral participation could both threaten the regime and lead to repression and alienate their supporters who see high levels of participation as a betrayal of the opposition status and tacit approval of the authoritarian character of the regime (Brown, 2012; p. 25; Tezcür, 2010). To

combat both of these pressures, Islamists parties may cast themselves simultaneously as political opposition and a political charitable organizations (Brooke, 2019).

However, even an Islamist party that fares relatively poorly in electoral contests can be invited to join a coalition government. This invitation suggests that the incumbent does not see the Islamist party as a threat to the regime (either democratic or semi-democratic). The choice to join a coalition government does give tacit acceptance to the legitimacy of the regime, so Islamist parties are likely to only choose to join these coalitions when doing so will not impact their reputations as service providers, anticorruption activists, or reformers.

The choice to accept an invitation to serve in a coalition government serves as an entry point to the second major observation that needs to be elaborated: the presence of an Islamist party in government is evidence of authoritarian breakdown. Across the Muslim-majority world, the age of decolonization did not put a single Islamist party into power. Therefore, Islamist parties have nearly universally been opposition movements wherever they have arisen. The Muslim-majority world saw the development of various forms of nondemocratic rule throughout the twentieth century including rentier monarchies, populist authoritarianism, single-party regimes (communist and otherwise), personal dictatorships, and military regimes (for instance, see Hinnebusch, 2006; Levitsky & Way, 2010). As these political regimes developed, they adopted a variety of relationships with Islamist groups. In Nasser's Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood was harshly repressed by the state (Cook, 2012; pp. 58–61). In Saudi Arabia, Islamists were initially welcomed by the monarchy, but they quickly became too activist to remain there and have faced repression since the 1980s and 1990s (Wiktorowicz, 2006). Similar ambivalence existed in Turkey, where the success of Islamist parties was seen as antithetical to the secular character of the republic (Mecham, 2004), and Indonesia, where Islamist groups were only allowed to operate within the confines of Suharto's tightly controlled system (Pringle, 2010). Finally, in some cases Islamist parties were able to significantly influence state politics. In Pakistan and Sudan, Islamist parties worked closely with military regimes to mobilize support for regimes that lacked legitimacy (Ahmed, 2009; Haqqani, 2005). In only one case—the Islamic Republic of Iran—did an Islamist opposition movement gain full control of the state's powers.<sup>2</sup>

Since the onset of the third wave of democratization, new opportunities for participation have emerged for Islamist parties. While democratization has crept more slowly into the Muslim-majority world than it did in Southern Europe and Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s, competitive elections have increasingly become the standard for a plurality of states in this region. Through democratic elections, Islamist have led or participated in governments from Morocco to Indonesia.

Thus, the presence of a member of an Islamist political party in a cabinet-level position suggests either (1) a willingness—or need—on the part of an authoritarian incumbent to expand their political base to remain in power or (2) the government being formed is the result of a democratic election and a bargaining process to form a coalition.

## 4 | IDENTIFYING ISLAMIST ELECTORAL SUCCESS

To empirically explore the theory laid out above, I proceed in two parts. First, I consider the first half of the “one person, one vote, one time” hypothesis by examining the conditions under which Islamist parties succeed electorally. I then proceed to examining the effects of Islamist electoral success on the democratic futures of regimes in which Islamist parties compete.



Should electoral success be conceptualized by seat share or the opportunity to participate in government? Answering this question is partially a theoretical exercise (see above). However, by examining the effect of several theorized factors on either seat share or the probability of being in government, I can offer empirical support to the idea that Islamist parties use electoral opportunities to springboard into government, not win legislative seats.

The sample used in these analyses comes from an exhaustive search of the records of parliamentary elections in the Muslim-majority world. While Muslims could ostensibly mobilize within Islamist parties anywhere, the theory is focused on Muslim-majority countries. Parties are primarily identified with data from Kurzman and Naqvi (2010), though they are expanded to include election years that are missed in these data. If an election year included an Islamist party that was not listed in Kurzman and Naqvi's data, I searched previous election years to make sure that this was when the party entered the system. Kurzman and Naqvi also identify several elections in which Islamists competed as independents that I do not include in my analysis which is focused on the effect of formally organized Islamist parties, not independent Islamist candidates. For instance, this causes me to exclude the Muslim Brotherhood as an Islamist party in Egypt until it formed the Freedom and Justice Party in 2011 because the Muslim Brotherhood was not allowed to form a political party, and its members ran as independents until after the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. I also only include parties that won at least one seat in an election. Kurzman and Naqvi's data is admirably exhaustive, but it includes a large number of parties that have never won a seat in a national legislature. Sometimes these parties do not win seats because they boycott elections or they are banned during a period of time. This is a problem because not winning any seats could be evidence of a lack of popularity for a party, but it could also be evidence that the incumbent leaders do not want the Islamist party to win a seat or evidence that the party itself does not want to win a seat. I am particularly interested in the effect that Islamist parties have on the evolution of political systems when they participate in those systems; parties that do not win seats are not participating in the political system. Table 1 lists the elections included in the analyses that follow.

The most important theorized covariates of Islamist electoral success are the openness of the political system and whether the Islamist party has a history of competing in elections, both of which can be derived from the "one person, one vote, one time" hypothesis. The key independent variables are whether or not this is the first election the party has competed in and political liberalization. The "one person, one vote, one time" hypothesis suggests that Islamist parties are likely to win elections when they compete for the first time and when elections newly become more competitive. In each of the models I include a binary variable that is coded as 1 if this is the first election that the Islamist party competed in and 0 otherwise. To measure political liberalization, I rely on the "electoral democracy index" from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) data set (Coppedge et al., 2021). This index attempts to quantitatively capture Robert Dahl's canonical conceptualization of electoral democracy—or "polyarchy"—that includes competitive elections, freely operating political and civil society groups, extensive suffrage rights, protections for civil liberties, and an independent media (Dahl, 1971). This measure is normalized to range from 0 to 1 where 0 indicates the lowest levels of electoral democracy and 1 indicates the highest levels of electoral democracy. The models include both the value of this index and the change in this index from the year before the election took place.

The models also account for ideological variation across Islamist parties with two binary indicator variables. This measure is often constructed out of a review of literature produced by the party (Kurzman & Naqvi, 2009; Yildirim & Lancaster, 2015). Unfortunately, this empirical



**TABLE 1** List of countries and elections years included in the statistical models

Country	Election years	Maximum number of Islamist parties holding seats at one time
Afghanistan	2005, 2010	3
Algeria	1997, 2002, 2007, 2012, 2017	3
Bahrain	2006, 2010, 2014, 2018	3
Bangladesh	1986, 1991, 1996, 2001, 2008, 2014, 2018	2
Egypt	2011, 2015, 2020	4
Indonesia	1999, 2004, 2009, 2014, 2019	5
Jordan	1993, 2003, 2007, 2013, 2016	2
Lebanon	1992, 1996, 2000, 2005, 2009, 2018	3
Malaysia	1964, 1969, 1974, 1978, 1982, 1986, 1990, 2004, 2008, 2013, 2018	1
Maldives	2009, 2014, 2019	1
Mauritania	2013, 2018	1
Morocco	2002, 2007, 2011, 2016	1
Pakistan	1970, 1977, 1988, 1990, 1993, 1997, 2002, 2008, 2013, 2018	5
Sudan	1986, 2010, 2015	2
Tajikistan	2000, 2005, 2010	1
Tunisia	2011, 2014, 2019	1
Turkey	1973, 1977, 1987, 1991, 1995, 1999, 2002, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2018	1
Yemen	1993, 1997, 2003	1

approach severely limits the range of observations that can be analyzed. I opt to categorize the ideologies of Islamist parties in terms of their organizational pedigree. The first of these indicators considers whether or not the party embraces the Salafi interpretation of Islam. Salafism is a particularly puritanical interpretation of Islam that seeks to establish—or reestablish—modes of authority and social life that existed during the first generation of Muslims (Meijer, 2009). Many Salafis avoid direct political engagement, and the “jihadi” strain of Salafism rejects electoral politics and focuses on more violent forms of confrontation (Wiktorowicz, 2006). Salafi political parties are a relatively new phenomenon in the Muslim-majority world, but increasing liberalization seems to have created incentives for elements of this strain of Islamism to participate in elections (McCants, 2012). Salafis also tend to hold the least strong attachments to democratic institutions (Bokhari & Senzai, 2013; pp. 81–100).

The other indicator considers whether or not the party is *ikhwani*, meaning it is ideologically and organizationally linked to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. The Society for Muslim Brothers (*jama'at al-ikhwan al-muslimoon*), often referred to as the Muslim Brotherhood was founded in Egypt in 1929 and is the most influential Islamist movement in the world. The Muslim Brotherhood emerged in a period of upheaval in Egypt with the goal of

remaking the Islamic world into a pious and united community in the aftermath of the collapse of European colonialism. While the Brotherhood was not opposed to the use of violence to achieve their goals, they emphasized grass-roots education, preaching, and preparation before direct confrontation with the state (Euben & Zaman, 2009; pp. 52–54). This emphasis on long-term political goals through short-term social goals is still emblematic of the Muslim Brotherhood (Brooke, 2019). And the Muslim Brotherhood, especially since the 1990s, seems to be strongly supportive of democratic institutions (Bokhari & Senzai, 2013; pp. 49–80).

Groups that fall outside of the categories of either Salafis or *Ikhwanis* are typically the most participatory parties in the world of Islamism. They include groups like the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey, al-Nahdha in Tunisia, and the National Mandate Party (PAN) in Indonesia. They are first and foremost political parties who aim to win seats, influence policy, and govern. This distinguishes them from Salafi and *Ikhwani* parties which are dual organizations: part party and part social service provider (Tabaar & Yildirim, 2020). I make no claims about which of these ideological categories is more or less “moderate” or “radical” because these terms are highly context specific. Instead, these categories serve as broad ideological groupings to distinguish, cross-nationally, similarities, and differences among Islamist parties competing in a variety of electoral systems.

I also include a control for the effective number of parties in the national legislature after each election. This number is calculated using Laakso and Taagepera (1979) formula that is the inverse of the sum of the squares of the proportion of seats that each party held in the national legislature. This measure is included to account for the fact that these political regimes vary widely in the number of parties that win seats in the legislature. Some of the regimes included in this analysis are single-party dominant regimes (Tajikistan, Algeria) and other forms of highly controlled political environments (Bahrain, Jordan) as well as highly competitive multiparty regimes (Indonesia, Morocco). Kuwait's elections get dropped from the data by including this variable because Kuwait does not have formal political parties, so members of the Kuwaiti legislature are all nonpartisan. Candidates that are endorsed by the Islamist Constitutional Movement (Hadas) are counted as part of this group's seat share, but there are no other organized political groups that endorse candidates in this way in Kuwait (Brown, 2007).

Finally, I include broad structural conditions as controls in the models. First, in recognition of the fact that Islamist parties consistently win seats in elections from Morocco to Indonesia, I include a binary regional control variable that distinguishes parties that compete in Arab-majority countries from those that compete elsewhere. The models also include measures of both Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita and GDP growth rates. These data are drawn from the World Bank.

Figure 1 shows the results of two models meant to evaluate the first half of the “one person, one vote, one time” hypothesis. The first model uses OLS regression to predict electoral success in the usual way: seat share (measured as a proportion between 0 and 1). The second model uses logistical regression to predict whether or not the Islamist party is part of the government, and includes seat share as a covariate, as well. These models offer evidence for the notion that, if Islamist parties are likely to succeed electorally as elections become more open only when electoral success is not conceptualized as seat shares, but as participation in government. The results of these two empirical tests are telling. No variable is statistically significant at conventional levels in the OLS model. However, in the model that predicts whether or not the Islamist party is a member of the government, the strongest predictor is the 1-year change in the V-Dem electoral democracy index. This offers support to a reconceptualization of the “one

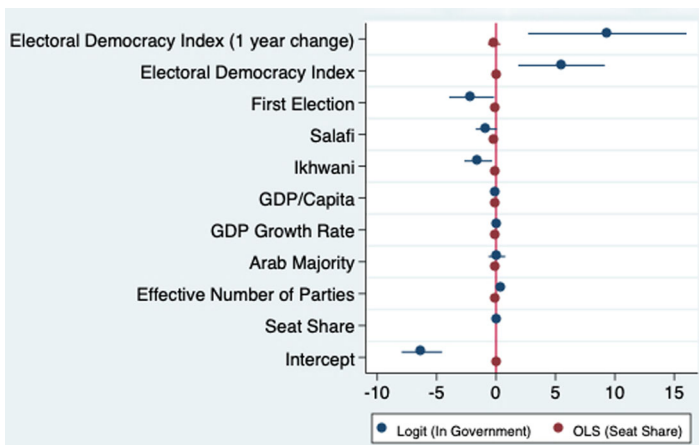


FIGURE 1 Competing models of electoral success

person, one vote, one time” hypothesis: increasing levels of electoral democracy do increase the chances of an Islamist party participating in government if not increasing the number of seats that Islamists win. However, the logistic regression also suggests that in the first election in which Islamist parties participate they are less likely to be included in government than after subsequent elections. This does not support the “one person, one vote, one time” hypothesis, which argues that the first election should be the one that catapults Islamist parties into power where they will dismantle democratic structures and impose some form of Islamic rule.

Moving to a discussion of the other variables in the logistic regression, not surprisingly, as Islamist parties gain more seats in parliament they are more likely to be part of the government. As there are more parties in the parliament, Islamists are more likely to be a part of the government. Increasing wealth, as measured by GDP per capita, makes Islamist parties less likely to be part of the government. Finally, *Ikhwani* and *Salafi* parties are both less likely to be included in government than other Islamist political parties.

## 5 | THE EFFECT OF ISLAMIST PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNMENT

Understanding that Islamist participation in government is a more realistic conceptualization of Islamist electoral success than seat share, I now move to consider the more insidious second half of the “one person, one vote, one time” hypothesis: that Islamist electoral success will cause deliberalization of the political regime. To test the effect of Islamist participation on the regime I rely on the five “high-level” democracy indexes from the V-Dem database as dependent variables. In particular, the dependent variables are changes over either 1 year or 5 years in each of these indexes (yielding 10 models in total). These dependent variables were created by subtracting the V-Dem index value at the year that the election took place from the index value either 1 or 5 years after an election was held.

Therefore, if a country’s score on a given V-Dem index increased over the time period, the value of the variable is positive, and if a country’s score decreased the value of the variable is negative.

The V-Dem database includes five “high-level” democracy indexes. The first of these indexes, the electoral democracy index, was described above. The liberal democracy index emphasizes the limits placed on state power and protections of individual and minority rights and liberties. This index specifically emphasizes the importance of protecting civil liberties, and valuing the rule of law, an independent judiciary, and checks on executive powers. The measures for the participatory democracy index “emphasize active participation by citizens in all political processes, electoral and non-electoral” (Coppedge et al., 2021; p. 44). The deliberative democracy index includes measures of the process for reaching political decisions. A deliberative democracy emphasizes public reasoning and respectful dialogs among informed participants. Finally, the egalitarian democracy index emphasizes the need for material and immaterial equality to foster the exercise of rights, liberties, and opportunities for political participation. All of these indexes are scaled to range from 0 to 1.

Each of the models include many of the same covariates as the models discussed above. I also include the level of each index in the year the election took place as a covariate in each model.

The results of the models predicting a 1-year change in the democracy indexes are presented in Figure 2 and the results of the models predicting a 5-year change in the democracy indexes are presented in Figure 3. In both cases, the results are clear: Islamist parties' presence in government is associated with positive changes in virtually all conceptualizations of democracy over both 1 and 5 years. The presence of an Islamist party in government is associated with a nearly 4% increase in the electoral democracy index over 1 year, and nearly 6% increase over 5 years. These models lend strong refutation to the “one person, one vote, one time” hypothesis. Indeed, it appears that the presence of an Islamist party in government is associated with consistent, if modest, shifts toward greater democracy. The findings are most robust when democracy is conceptualized in its more minimal forms: the electoral and liberal democracy indexes.

Moving to the effects of the other covariates, it is interesting to note that, in neither model, does the percent of seats that parties win have any effect on the level of democracy: further

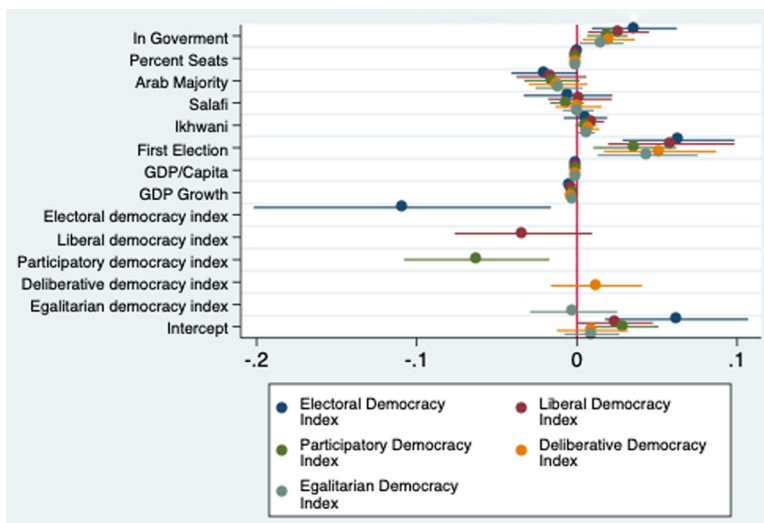


FIGURE 2 One year change in democracy indices

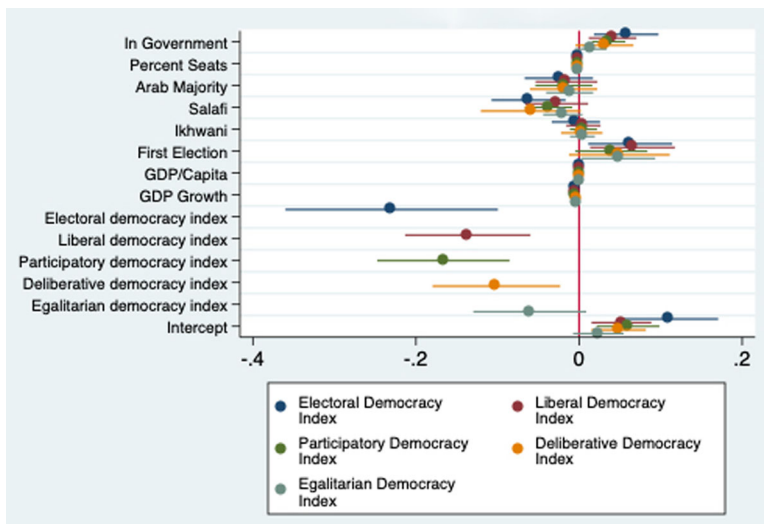


FIGURE 3 Five year change in democracy indices

evidence of the inadequacy of the “one person, one vote, one time” hypothesis. The regional indicators also do not impact the levels of democracy. There is only one significant effect of ideology in the models: over 5 years, the participation of Salafi parties in electoral politics is associated with lower levels of electoral, participatory, and deliberative democracy. The effects of the first elections indicator warrant some discussion. In the years after the first election in which Islamist parties participate, there appears to be immediate increases in all levels of democracy followed by lagging democratization. Measures of electoral and liberal democracy continue to improve over the 5-year period after the election, but the other indicators are not significantly affected. The “one person, one vote, one time” hypothesis suggest that these indicators should be associated with negative effects on the democracy indicators, so, while the 5-year effects do not appear to be consistently positive, the effects still do not comport with the expectations of the most cynical views on Islamist electoral participation. Finally, the effects of the election-year democracy indicators on future levels of democracy are largely negative. These effects support prior scholarship that shows a consistent decline in democracy over much of the time period covered by the sample used in the analysis (e.g., Waldner & Lust, 2018).

## 6 | CONCLUSION

This article has argued that scholars of Islamist political parties need to expand their understanding of the electoral success. Islamist parties can reach many of their political and social goals without winning many seats in the legislature; indeed, it may be that limiting their electoral participation enables Islamist parties to balance the demands of their dual character as both parties and social movements. Islamist parties that win few legislative seats can still meaningfully participate in state politics by being invited to serve in coalition governments. While past theory had argued that Islamist electoral success—in the form of large legislative victories—could lead to resurgent, Islamist-led, authoritarianism, by conceptualizing electoral success as participating in a coalition government, the effect on the future of democracy was

less clear. Pushing back against the “one person, one vote, one time” hypothesis, I argued that Islamist participation in government is a clear signal of democratic strength. Empirical tests confirmed both that traditional models of Islamist electoral success perform better when this success is conceptualized as participation in government, and that participation in government is associated with improved democratic performance across multiple measures of democracy.

Additionally, the empirical models include novel measures of the ideology of Islamist parties, and these measures offer new insight into the types of Islamist parties that are likely to be included in government coalition. Both Salafi and *ikhwani* parties were less likely to be included in governing coalitions than mainstream Islamist parties. These findings speak to the need to better categorize the difference between Islamist parties' ideologies in future theory-building. In particular, previous work that discussed the ideology of Islamist parties has emphasized dimensions such as willingness to engage in violence (e.g., Ashour, 2009) and acceptance of democratic norms (e.g., Sinno & Khanani, 2009). However, Islamist parties implicitly accept a need to lay down arms against the state and accept various elements of political democracy; this is what sets a political party apart from a social movement or a rebel group. By moving past these frameworks that were derived in a generation of Islamist politics when democratic opportunities were far less common, scholars can uncover much more important and salient differences across Islamist parties. This article offers a simple categorization based on divisions in the development of Islamic reformist movements throughout the twentieth century. By emphasizing these ideational antecedents in the development of Islamist political parties, the empirical strategy used above matches the ways in which Islamist groups are typically distinguished from one another in academic literature on Islamic politics and among Islamists themselves.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for the feedback of two anonymous reviewers and the editorial staff at DOMES for the help in revisions. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 2021 annual meeting of the Great Plains Political Science Association and the 2022 annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association. All remaining errors remain my own.

<sup>2</sup> It is not merely for convenience that the Iranian regime is largely left out of the analysis below. The Iranian form of Islamism differs sharply from that elsewhere for at least three reasons. First, unlike most other Islamist groups, the Iranian regime is led by clerics. This is a common feature of Shi'ite Islamist groups because of the hierarchical nature of the Shi'ite sect, but the necessity of clerical leadership in Khomeini's founding ideology precludes the types of dynamics in party politics that are at the heart of this article's approach. Second, Iranian Islamists came to power through revolution, not elections. This puts them outside the scope of this article's central thesis. Third, much of the contemporary Iranian political system is built around charismatic personal leadership, not party politics (see Brownlee 2007).

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**How to cite this article:** Curtis, J. (2022). Reevaluating Islamist electoral success and participation in government. *Digest of Middle East Studies*, 31, 170–184.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/dome.12270>