RELIGION AND PARTY
PLATFORM FORMATION

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Why do some religious political actors continue to pursue a closed and rigid religious worldview, ‘immoderation’, in their party platforms? Extant literature expects religious political actors to ‘moderate’ within the party system ‘from a relatively closed and rigid worldview to one more open and tolerant of alternative perspectives’ (Schwedler, 2007: 3) either because they want to expand their constituency by using a less confrontational party platform (‘behavioural moderation’), or because they have internalised liberal democratic ideals through their interactions with secular forces within the party system (‘ideological moderation’) (Schwedler, 2011: 352–361). Nonetheless, with the exception of Christian Democratic parties in Western Europe, immoderation defines the party platforms of most religious political actors today, which often demand to bring public policies in line with a particular religious interpretation and are unwilling to compromise with secular forces in this quest. To discuss this unexpected development, this chapter utilises a ‘most different systems approach’ and looks at what factors explain the similar use of immoderation in the party platforms of two religious political actors, the Christian Right coalition within the Republican Party in the United States and the pro-Islamic movement parties in Turkey, in two dissimilar political regimes.

Through this comparative discussion, this chapter argues that religious political actors use ‘immoderation’ in their party platforms both strategically in order to form a small yet dedicated supporter base, and ideologically to consolidate their moral majority. This chapter looks at immoderation in party platforms because ‘platforms can be used as a shorthand understanding of what the party stands for and what its policy positions and priorities are’ (Conger, 2010: 653). After all, party platforms tell us both about what is going on inside parties, such as about intra-party discussions between factions, party goals, and about the party base (Harmel, 2018: 229–239). Here, a ‘party platform’ not only refers to written statements, such as party programmes, but also to public statements made by party leaders. This is because the use of religion by political parties often serves a symbolic function to ‘appease public concern without necessarily directly or substantively addressing the underlying problems’ by reassuring voters of the party’s capacity to solve problems and by proposing a moral model to be emulated (Oliver and Marion, 2008: 400). Hence, this chapter takes a comprehensive perspective on party platforms and looks at how religious political actors define and set out their formal political agendas and how their leaders communicate this agenda to the public via statements and policy proposals.
To elaborate further, the rest of this chapter is organised into four parts. The first part delineates the methodology and research design of this study, while the second and third parts analyse the strategic and ideological use of immoderation by religious political actors in the United States and in Turkey comparatively. The fourth part concludes with a discussion of this chapter’s findings.

Methodology and research design

This chapter uses a ‘most different systems’ approach in order to identify similar relations between the independent and the dependent variables that are observed in different contexts (Przeworski and Teune, 1970: 34–39). Thus, this chapter looks at how both the Christian Right within the Republican Party in the United States and pro-Islamic movement-parties in Turkey, despite operating in different socio-political contexts, have gone through a similar political evolution from the margins of the political spectrum to its centre. In doing so, this chapter engages in a cross-religious comparison, which allows the examination of ‘whether certain political processes are unique to specific religions or regions’ (Altınıordu, 2010: 518) ‘without making essentialist arguments’ (Tepe, 2012: 470). Furthermore, it compares rather different organisations: one, which for the most part of its existence has operated as a political party with a clear hierarchy (pro-Islamic parties in Turkey) and another that influences party politics as a diffuse coalition partner of an existing political party (Christian Right and the Republican Party in the United States), because both represent a similar breed of entity in politics: the ‘movement-party’.

Movement-parties operate in between social movements and political parties wherein political activism inside and outside of institutionalised politics complement each other (Goldstone, 2004: 6). Foremost, ‘movement-parties’ combine intra- and extra-institutional mobilisation: ‘one day, legislators of such parties may debate bills in parliamentary committees, but the next day, they participate in disruptive demonstrations or the non-violent occupation of government sites’ (Kitschelt, 2006: 281). As such, within the seemingly permanent two-party system of US politics, the Christian Right can only influence intra-institutional politics, such as decision-making within the Republican Party, through its extra-institutional political activities, such as through its mobilisation of alienated voters to the polls for the party, and by advising decision-makers, such as the president. Similarly, in Turkey, where new political actors can only express their demands in party politics within the strict boundaries of laicism and where party closures are common when they become, or appear to become, ‘too Islamic’, pro-Islamic movements can only survive these strict institutional laws by preserving their organisational strength and societal influence outside institutional politics, such as grassroots social service provisions.

Furthermore, ‘movement-parties’ have dual organisations between a political party with a centralised decision-making circle and a social movement with diffuse grassroots organisations at the local level. In particular, in US party politics, where political parties are umbrella organisations composed of various ‘coalitions’ representing diverse interests, the Christian Right is one of the most important coalitions within the Republican Party, yet at the same time it also represents a social movement with diverse local level offshoots that aim to influence policy at the grassroots level. Likewise, pro-Islamic movements in Turkey, such as the National Outlook Movement, have formed Islamic political parties, which have been backed up by a larger Islamic counter-hegemony outside formal institutions housing various Islamic Orders, media outlets, publishing houses and private schools. Thus, both religious political actors influence politics through their participation in party politics as well as through their scattered grassroots organisations.

To engage in such a cross-religious comparison of two similar movement-parties in two different political contexts, the next section will address the strategic immoderation of religious political actors in the United States and in Turkey.
Strategic immoderation

In his famous work on the ‘spatial model’, Downs (2000) argues that parties are strategic vote-seekers, which, in their quest to maximise votes, formulate ‘moderate’, more widely accepted and uncontroversial, party platforms to appeal to a wider array of voters than a narrow one would. Such a focus on vote-maximising ‘strategic moderation’ by mainstream parties, however, cannot explain the party platform formation of those smaller political actors, such as niche religious political actors, that know they cannot win the masses’ approval and thus instead seek office, influence or policy instead of votes per se (Müller and Strom, 1999: 1–35). Kitschelt (1995: 1–47), in his study of extreme right-wing parties in Europe, for instance, finds that such niche ideological parties formulate radical (immoderate) party platforms in order to invigorate the electorate at the margins of the political spectrum by addressing issues mainstream parties ignore. Hence, the formation of an immoderate party platform serves the strategic purpose of situating a niche religious political actor as a prospective ‘kingmaker’ or ‘blackmail party’ with potentially crucial political leverage over mainstream actors with the support of a small but dedicated ideological supporter base.

The early platforms of the Christian Right within the Republican Party and of pro-Islamic movement-parties within Turkish party politics that situate them as strategically immoderate kingmakers illustrate this point.

Christian Right and the Republican Party

Some Evangelical groups in the United States, witnessing the liberal socio-political atmosphere of the 1960s/1970s, feared the decline of religion in American life, and thus sought to increase their political role (Wilcox, 1992: 10–14). This religious revivalism was ‘not any single organization or any other formal entity, but rather a loose collection of people and organisations with a shared socially conservative religious, moral, and social agenda that they identified with “Christian” values’ (Feld et al., 2002: 175). Its political rise was mainly displayed by local movements, seeking ‘the defense of traditional cultural and social values against what the participants saw as a godless society that had replaced firm moral standards with a system of relativism’ (Le Beau, n.d.). Fearing the social liberalism of this era, Evangelical leaders, who previously advised political abstention, started directing their followers to seek an increased role within politics in order to improve the world to prepare for Christ’s return (Buzzard, 1989: 133–146). In this political climate, Jimmy Carter’s presidential candidacy in 1976 was a turning point for these religious groups as it mobilised apolitical Evangelical voters to the polls (Wilcox, 1992: 11). This mobilisation also caught the attention of the Republican Party, which was ‘look [ing] for a way to capitalise on what appeared to be widespread conservative dissatisfaction over the country’s moral drift’ (Lambert, 2008: 196). Through a ‘calculated, sophisticated strategy to build a disorganised social movement into a formidable party faction with a grassroots-oriented network of activists’ (Rozell and Wilcox, 1996: 271), the Republican Party started integrating this religious awakening, the Christian Right, into its ranks.

In these early years, the Christian Right was a niche player. Institutionally, it was bound by the first-past-the-post system of US congressional and presidential elections and thus could only have a political voice ‘by forming extra-party organizations that can mobilize voters’ within the ranks of the Republican Party (Mohseni and Wilcox, 2009: 198). Organisationally, the religious constituencies forming the societal base for the Christian Right were ‘too few in number, and too divided by tradition, to command a majority’ (Mohseni and Wilcox, 2009: 218). Therefore, the Christian Right could only seek political influence and access rather than votes.
In such a political context, the Christian Right’s political significance was rather in its appeal amongst Evangelical voters, who historically abstained from politics because they wanted to focus on individual salvation. Hence, in order to mobilise these apolitical constituents to the polls, the Christian Right pushed for a strategically immoderate party platform within the Republican Party because an immoderate party platform would not necessarily appeal to the majority of American voters, but it would nevertheless mobilise this niche Evangelical voting bloc (Conger and Racheter, 2006: 128–142).

In particular, the Christian Right, foremost, pushed for a party platform that was purposefully extreme and confrontational in order to invigorate this religiously passionate voter base. It defined, for instance, the Christian Right’s political quest as a ‘religious war’ in defence of ‘American against Satan’ (Rozell and Wilcox, 1996: 285). In this, the Christian Right saw the ‘decline of traditional family values’ as its main party platform. Under the banner of ‘the family’ fell issues such as: abortion, LGBT rights, school prayer and the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. The ‘decline’ in these concerns amongst many ordinary Americans led the Christian Right to view these issues as parts of ‘satanic attempts to destroy the biblical concept of the Christian home’ (Williams, 2010: 139). In response, the Christian Right pushed for the introduction of policies and principles in accordance with the Bible in the Republican Party’s platform, such as issues concerning LGBTQ rights and abortion, and ‘attacked alternative views as misguided biblical interpretations or secularism’ (Moen, 1994: 349). Taking this further, the Christian Right also sought to push its agenda further by preparing ‘morality ratings’ for politicians and media outlets, rating their perceived commitment to ‘Christian values’ (Banwart, 2013: 10).

Via this approach, the Christian Right succeeded in organising the disengaged [right-wing] Evangelical voters around a political movement. Hence, although the Christian Right started out as a small ideological movement at the margins of US politics, within a decade it had gained significant national and local influence within the Republican Party and more widely. Specifically, as a result of the Christian Right’s influence, issues, such as abortion and sex and violence in the media, took their place in the Republican Party programmes of 1976 and of 1984 respectively (Feeney, 2012).

**Pro-Islamic movement-parties in Turkey**

A similar strategic use of party platform immoderation helped pro-Islamic movement parties in Turkey win a stable presence in party politics despite their initial niche appeal.

For decades, Islamic Orders, informal religious organisations under the leadership of charismatic figures preaching a wide range of Islamic interpretations, defined the religious landscape of the Ottoman Empire. With the establishment of the Turkish Republic, however, Orders were banned under the secular laws of the country. As a result, Islamic Orders first tried to influence politics by lending support to the existing centre-right Democratic Party of the 1950s. Nevertheless, the heir to the Democratic Party in the 1960s, the Justice Party, marginalised Islamist parliamentarians and their demands in favour of big businesses and remained unresponsive to their calls for de-secularisation (Emre, 2002). Hence, some Islamic Orders under the leadership of the Naksibendi Order and marginalised Islamist parliamentarians decided to join forces and to form their own political party under the banner of the National Outlook Movement (NOM) (Emre, 2002). This arrangement was similar to that between the Christian Right and the Republican Party: the Christian Right was an accumulation of Evangelical demands looking for a way to influence institutional politics through the Republican Party, and likewise, the NOM was a build-up of Islamic Orders and marginalised Islamist politicians within existing centre-right parties aiming to exert influence in politics through a new political party.
Like the Christian Right, the NOM was initially a minor player, in the late 1960s/early 1970s. Institutionally, the ‘laicist’ Turkish regime was formally secular, while also bringing the religious field under its supervision via religious affairs and religious education, and limiting their sphere of influence with its strict application of secularism. Within this context, the NOM’s first party, the National Order Party (Milli Nizam Partisi), was closed down in its very first year for its alleged ‘un-secular’ activities by the Turkish Constitutional Court, while a second party, the National Salvation Party (Milli Selamet Partisi), was under close scrutiny. Furthermore, the NOM was facing strong contenders in party politics. Existing mainstream parties, the centre-right Justice Party and the centre-left Republican People’s Party, were electorally and politically dominating the party system. Organisationally, although the Turkish electorate was conservative, it also had strong centre-right political parties, such as the Democratic Party in the 1960s and the Justice Party in the 1970s, to vote for. Thus, the NOM could not hope to win national elections but only expect at best to influence policy of incumbent administrations.

Meanwhile, although mainstream parties, the centre-right Justice Party and the centre-left Republican People’s Party, were leading in the elections of 1973 and 1977, their votes were increasingly not enough for them to form a government on their own and thus they were in need of minor coalition partners. Within this new political context, similar to the Christian Right’s niche appeal amongst Evangelicals, the NOM’s niche appeal was primarily amongst ‘the homogeneous Sunni-Muslim base of farmers and the conservative petty bourgeoisie of shopkeepers, small merchants and artisans from provincial towns and cities’ (Yavuz, 2009: 49). Such people were a political asset that could potentially turn the NOM into a strategic kingmaker and/or blackmail party. Tactically, it appeared that an immoderate party platform emphasising the economic underdevelopment and political marginalisation of these societal groups by the laicist establishments might yield desired results.

As a result, the NOM in the 1970s and 1980s, like the Christian Right, formulated a party platform defined by, foremost, a confrontational religious rhetoric that emphasised how alienation from Turkey’s traditional Islamic culture was leading to moral and thus to political decay (Özbudun, 1986: 142–156). Specifically, NOM’s first party programme stated that the party was established because its leaders wished from God peace, happiness, prosperity and salvation for the Turkish people (National Order Party Programme, 1970). Within this framework, NOM also took a critical stance against (1) the secularisation of Turkey on the grounds that secularism would undermine Turkey’s morality and authenticity and move the country away from Islam, and against (2) economic liberalisation, which the party associated with the infiltration of Turkish society Western/foreign/non-Islamic values. Instead, the NOM advocated a new system called the ‘Just Order’ (Adil Düzen) (Erbakan, 1991), which would minimise the influence of Istanbul-based big corporations and Western companies in the economy in favour of small businesses and state-owned heavy industry, ban interest-based banking, and instead introduce Islamic financing (Erbakan, 1991). Moreover, the NOM advocated for a closed and rigid application of Islam by seeking social engineering through the state. Hence, it paid particular attention to the education of a new pious generation in its party platforms (National Order Party Programme, 1970; National Salvation Party Programme, 1973).

Such an immoderate party platform established the NOM as a minor yet vital and stable presence in Turkish party politics. NOM’s movement-parties brought small-town merchants and the urban poor to the polls gathering about 12–15 percent of the votes throughout the 1970s and 1980s and filling the void between them and the mainstream parties. As a result, NOM parties became minor coalition partners to mainstream parties that no longer could form a majority government by themselves and thus needed the support of the NOM. By doing so, the NOM thrived, having more influence than its votes, for instance, taking over crucial
ministries, such as the ministries of Interior, Justice, Trade, and Industry, as a minor coalition partner. Hence, like its Christian Right counterpart that increased its role in party politics by commanding a small yet decisive minority, the NOM increased its importance in party politics by establishing itself as a kingmaker party.

However, such a kingmaker role would soon face new socio-political obstacles and opportunities.

**Ideological immoderation**

In the inclusion-moderation literature, one of the most important mechanisms behind ideological moderation – moderation as a result of an ideological transformation towards the acceptance of political pluralism – is ‘political learning’, through which religious political actors internalise liberal democratic values by interacting with (secular) opposition leaders with whom they need to engage in dialogue, negotiations and compromise (Schwedler, 2007; Wickham, 2004). The assumption in this formulation is that religious political actors are operating from a position of weakness vis-à-vis the political system and other political actors. This is especially the case for religious political actors operating under authoritarian regimes wherein the regime has the means and the will to crush any political actor not playing by their rules of the game, and thus wherein opposition parties across the political spectrum need to collaborate against the regime. Such an arrangement, however, does not account for a situation where religious political actors are holding a dominant position in the party system, and thus where religious political actors do not need to engage in dialogue, negotiations and compromise in the absence of strong political competitors who counterbalance them, contest their social engineering agenda, and from whom they can learn to respect political pluralism. In such situations, a religious political actor rather will want to consolidate its dominance. Hence, instead of moderation, it will adapt an immoderate party platform that serves the ideological purpose of consolidating the dominant religious political actor’s moral majority in the society by redefining the political centre to which other political actors need adjusting.

The increasing dominance and immoderation of the Christian Right coalition within the Republican Party and of pro-Islamic movement-parties within Turkish party politics illustrate this point.

**The Christian Right and the Republican Party**

By the 1990s, the Christian Right realised the limits of its strategic immoderation. Institutionally, although the Christian Right–Republican Party collaboration reached its peak during Reagan’s 1980 presidential campaign, this ended up being a short-lived victory because Reagan remained largely unresponsive to the demands of the Christian Right (Le Beau, n.d.). Organisationally, although the Christian Right was gaining momentum amongst right-wing Evangelical voters, many Americans believed in an individual’s right to choose his or her personal moral path (Wald, 1997: 201–238). As a result, the Christian Right started assuming a ‘more mainstream conciliatory approach’ (Feld et al., 2002: 181) in the belief that this potentially could allow them to reach a wider audience. According to Moen (1996: 461),

this redirection of the Christian Right, from a protest movement bent on installing moral uniformity through law, to a coalition partner willing to bend on compliance with moral principles, [was] emblematic of a gradual and thoughtful public adjustment to the realities of politics.

Foremost, in stark contrast to their previous critique of secularism, Christian Right leaders started using a dual language, one towards their core supporters filled with biblical references,
and another towards a wider audience stripped from extremist and religious references (Rozell and Wilcox, 1996: 279–280). For instance, ‘instead of arguing for laws that would clearly favour their preferred ways of believing and living, they argued for a law that would not “discriminate” against their preferred ways of believing and living’ (Feld et al., 2002: 175). Furthermore, instead of asking for the protection of the traditional family, the Christian Right started expressing common concerns, such as corruption and crime, problems they suggested were the result of a moral decline and family values in the society, in order to appeal to voters beyond their Evangelical base (Rozell and Wilcox, 1996: 281). And, instead of preparing morality ratings to demand accountability from policymakers, the Christian Right started demanding new ‘rights’. For example, instead of condemning abortion as a sin, the movement started demanding the ‘rights of the unborn’ (Moen, 1994: 352).

As a result of its behavioural moderation, the Christian Right established itself as an integral part of the Republican Party and thus of US politics (Conger and Racheter, 2006: 128–142). With the support of the Christian Right in 1994, the Republican Party became ‘the majority party for the first time since the New Deal’ (Cibulka and Myers, 2008: 171). Consequently, while a ‘religiosity gap’ was non-existent between the Republican and Democratic voters prior to 1972 (Cibulka and Myers, 2008: 171), ‘over the last twenty years, church attendance [became] the main dividing line between Republican and Democratic voters’ (Campbell and Putnam, 2012: 35). This influence was consolidated when the presidency was transferred from a Democrat (Bill Clinton) to a Republican (George W. Bush) in 2000, allowing the new president to appoint ‘key Christian conservatives to cabinet and White House posts in his administration’ and to consult ‘members of [Christian Right] advocacy groups’ regularly ‘to plot strategy’ (Cibulka and Myers, 2008: 170). Such dominance was further expanded through the Christian Right’s reach to the people through its media outlets and schools, which in turn mobilised voters for the Republican Party. Today, under the Trump presidency, the Christian Right has reached its pinnacle as ‘white Evangelical Protestants have become the Republican base’ (Jelen and Wald, 2017: 21–22; emphasis added).

Given such dominance within the Republican Party base, the Christian Right today does not need to moderate its policies because it not only defines the Republican Party platform as a vital coalition within the party but also provides voter mobilisation for the party. This is especially important considering that other coalitions within the Republican Party, such as libertarians or business coalitions, had success in providing material resources but only minimal success in mobilising masses under a powerful ideology. Furthermore, the structure of US party politics does not really allow the Christian Right to be subjected to political learning from opposing political forces. Rather, the Christian Right’s main interactions in politics are with other conservatives within the Republican Party, who depend on the Christian Right for its mobilising potential. And on top of all, the Christian Right does not risk marginalisation anymore while continuing to advocate for an immoderate party platform given its stable place within the Republican Party and hence in US politics.

As a result, the Christian Right today is turning its dominance within the Republican Party to support its immoderate agenda. In particular, under President Bush (2001–2008), the Christian Right influenced the allocation of public funds when federal funding was withheld from policies opposed by the Christian Right, such as contraceptive education, and instead spent on policies supported by the Christian Right, such as abstinence-based sex-education programmes (Herzberg, 2004). Even under President Obama (2009–2017), a Democrat, the Christian Right continued its influence. The Christian Right saw President Obama as hostile to their causes – given his support for same-sex marriage and stem-cell research. Some also believed that he was a secret Muslim, and thus unsuited to be president. These factors led to the Christian Right’s grassroots influence
against Obama that helped to block his policies in the Congress and led eventually to the Trump presidency. Today, although President Trump’s personal life seems to be at odds with the values the Christian Right advocates, Christian Right leaders have welcomed him as a ‘Dream President’ given his support for their causes (Wilson-Hartgrove, 2018). For instance, in domestic politics, President Trump only considered and eventually choose a pro-life justice to the Supreme Court, and appointed Betsy DeVos as the Secretary of Education, who is an advocate for voucher programmes wherein ‘funds used for public education [become] available for parents to send their children to private religious-based schools … thereby … defund[ing] public schools while transferring tax revenues to religious academies’ (Rozell, 2017: 11). In foreign policy, President Trump introduced the ‘Muslim ban’ on travel from Iran, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen, and signed on to move the US Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Consequently, ‘the religious right [has become] the singular, unwavering loyal constituency of President Trump’ today (Rozell, 2017: 12).

A similar development in the meantime has been taking place in Turkish politics.

**Pro-Islamic movement-parties in Turkey**

By the 1990s, the pro-Islamic movement in Turkey, like its Christian Right counterpart, was at a critical juncture point when it realised its relative weakness vis-à-vis the secular regime. Institutionally, the Turkish Constitutional Court closed down four NOM parties on the grounds that they undermined the secular foundations of the Republic. Organisationally, the movement’s new grassroots activism was forcing the organisation ‘to confront new demands requiring pragmatic approaches to problem-solving’, and pressured them ‘to deal with the daily needs of the people’ (Yavuz, 2009: 63). This was a similar situation in which the Christian Right was finding itself within Republican Party: both actors had one foot in grassroots activism at the local level engaging with the pious, and another foot in party politics trying to establish themselves as major actors with clear demands and platforms. Consequently, like their counterparts in the Christian Right, ‘moderates within the [NOM] realised that they could also win national elections if they lowered their ideological commitments and stressed pragmatic policy solutions’ (Yavuz, 2009: 63). Other factors, such as changes in the socio-economic bases of Islamism (Oniş, 1997), institutional constraints (Mecham, 2004; Tepe, 2012) and political learning (Yavuz, 2009), amongst others, were equally influential in this decision. As a result, NOM’s third party, the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi) started to moderate its party platform until it was halted in 1997 by a ‘post-modern coup’ that ousted the Welfare Party out of the parliament for its un-secular activities. Thereafter, the Party was closed down by the Turkish Constitutional Court and an internal split erupted between the older generation that blocked the rise of the younger generation into leadership positions and resulted in the establishment of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP) in 2001 by the younger generation.

Like the Christian Right that shifted from demanding moral policies to demanding religious rights, this new party, in its early years, shifted from its ‘old claim that Turkey was not religious enough to the claim that Turkey was not democratic enough’ (Mecham, 2004: 346). This new party rebranded itself as a ‘conservative-democratic’ party devoid of Islamist associations in its platform. Furthermore, instead of claiming that they were the vanguards of the Turkish society leading the society towards Islam, the new leaders of the pro-Islamic movement claimed that they were the representatives of a pious majority that was barred from decision-making by secular elites for decades. Within this framework, both democratisation and European Union (EU) membership were presented as complementary components allowing freedom of religious exercise. In stark contrast to its past calls to reverse Westernisation and to replace the economic
system with one based on Islamic finance, they now prioritised a liberal economy and EU membership. Such prioritisations sharply contrasted with their predecessors, who were describing the liberal economy as being led by global Freemasons and the EU as a ‘Christian Club’ (Tanyıldız, 2003: 464).

Through such behavioural moderation, the AKP has developed into a ‘dominant party’, one ‘that outdistances all the others (and thus) is significantly stronger than others’ (Çarkoğlu, 2011: 44). In the last election of 2018, despite the rise of opposition figures and rising criticism, the AKP secured 42 percent of the votes in the parliamentary elections and won the presidency with 52 percent of the votes. This electoral dominance has allowed the AKP to institutionalise its political dominance. Today, the AKP has not only controlled the Executive since 2001 without a coalition partner but also the national legislature by controlling majority seats in the parliament. Furthermore, EU reforms in the mid-2000s altered the historical supervision of the Turkish military over party politics by limiting the military’s executive powers and areas of responsibilities and by increasing civilian control over the military. The judiciary’s role has also diminished in that party closures have become more difficult. In short, like its Christian Right counterpart, which has become both one of, if not the, most important coalition partner within the Republican Party and has built a Christian counter-culture with its own media and schools, the pro-Islamic movement in Turkey has become the dominant actor in Turkish party politics through the AKP and is supported by a counter-hegemonic Islamic bloc composed of various media outlets and businesses. All of this political dominance today contrasts sharply with the pro-Islamic movement’s relative weakness in its initial years, when they were facing strong political contenders and a strictly laicist regime always on their neck, and even with AKP’s early years, when the Islamic movement as a new centrist party needed to prove itself as a transformed party. However, now that the pro-Islamic movement is in a position of strength through the AKP, there is no motivation for it to continue to moderate.

Today, the AKP does not need to moderate its policies that are acceptable to all political parties because the AKP does not need to make compromises with other political actors to pass its desired legislation. Moreover, since its inauguration into office, the AKP had no coalition partners. Thus, the ‘political learning through interactions with secular forces’ did not take place with the AKP. In other words, the AKP, given its political dominance, never really had to engage in coalition building or in consensus building – the stuff through which actors internalise democratic values and political pluralism. Furthermore, moderation involves a ‘movement’ towards a political centre (Somer, 2014: 246), but in its absence, it is the dominant party that defines the centre. And in this case, it is the AKP that is defining the political centre of Turkish party politics today. In this, it is not the AKP that needs to adapt to an existing political centre but other political actors that need to adapt to the political centre that the AKP has redefined over the last decade. Within this context, immoderation for the AKP, like its Christian Right counterpart, has not risked political marginalisation given the weakness of the opposition and given AKP’s control of political institutions. Instead, it has allowed the AKP to consolidate its dominance in the party system.

Foremost, although there is no open Islamic reference left in the AKP’s official party programme and although the AKP has accepted to play within the boundaries of secular politics, its party platform nevertheless remains immoderate. In particular, the party often invokes policies aimed to consolidate its moral majority in the society, such as policies asking to ban alcohol because the government claims responsibility to protect the youth from alcoholism (Milliyet, 2013), or halting theatre plays and art exhibitions because the AKP government found them to be ‘too vulgar’ (Steinvorth, 2012). Furthermore, the social engineering agenda of AKP’s predecessors is still prevalent in its stated desire to construct a ‘religious generation’ (Hürriyet, 2012). In this, the Diyanet, the Presidency of Religious Affairs, ‘under AKP rule, [has] transformed
into a pliable state apparatus geared towards implementing the political ideology of the ruling cadre’ (Öztürk, 2016: 619). Minor moral policy issues have also replaced the economy and EU focus of the AKP in its early years. For instance, reproductive issues, such as abortion, caesarean section, and encouragement of three kids – issues that historically have not carried much political importance – were politicised on the grounds that ‘foreign’ forces are trying to control Turkey’s population growth (Hürriyet, 2013). In short, the AKP, like its Christian Right counterpart, is using an immoderate party platform to consolidate its moral majority in the society today.

Conclusion

Through a discussion of the Christian Right’s evolution within the Republican Party and of pro-Islamic movements in Turkish party politics, and thus through a cross-religious comparison of two similar behaviours in two fundamentally different political contexts, this chapter aimed to show why religious political actors continue to use immoderation, a closed and rigid religious worldview, in their party platforms despite expectations to the contrary. This chapter argued that the answer to this could be found in the status of religious political parties vis-à-vis other parties in the party system. Specifically, it argued that when religious political actors are in the minority, they may strategically adapt an immoderate party platform in order to form a small but loyal supporter base and thus have a niche yet vital role in politics. This chapter also argued that when religious political parties dominate the party system, they might pursue an immoderate party platform for ideological reasons to consolidate their moral majority in the society.

References


