

Administrative unit proliferation in parliamentary systems: Evidence from Turkish elections, 1960-2018

Murat Abus^{a,*} , Sabri Ciftci^b 

^a Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York, USA

^b Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas, USA

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ABSTRACT

Administrative unit proliferation carries significant policy consequences and has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Existing studies focus mainly on presidential systems, leaving a gap in understanding the causes of unit proliferation in other institutional settings. We argue that in parliamentary systems, electoral motives matter as in presidential systems, but proliferation decisions also depend on government type. Single-party governments are more likely to pursue proliferation to secure electoral success, especially under electoral uncertainty. Under dominant party systems with less uncertainty, such proliferation becomes less likely. Coalition governments face greater challenges due to ambiguity in policy responsibility and credit attribution, adding uncertainty to unit proliferation. Using original district-level splits data in Turkey from 1960–2018, we conduct random intercept logistic regression models to test these expectations. The results confirm that electoral motives and government type jointly shape proliferation decisions, adding to our understanding of how political institutions influence territorial policies. The study also assesses district level characteristics identified in prior work but situates them within the constraints of parliamentary systems. Taken together, the evidence shows how elite bargaining and electoral incentives structure territorial reforms in a context marked by electoral uncertainty, patronage, and various party systems.

1. Introduction

During the past three decades, many developing countries have increased the number of their subnational administrative units. This is a costly and potentially disruptive reform. It significantly reformulates citizen government relations and shifts developmental patterns by opening opportunities for new units while simultaneously affecting the economic base of the split units. Based on the asymmetrical power dynamics between the governments and the subnational units, an emerging literature has found that by creating new districts, leaders address the needs of local elites and provide benefits to localities in exchange for future electoral support (Grossman and Lewis, 2014; Pierskalla, 2016; Hassan, 2016). These reforms, however, do not follow a uniform pattern. It remains a significant puzzle why proliferation remains uneven despite clear electoral incentives. Understanding why creation stops under dominant single party rule, or why certain parliamentary governments abstain while others prioritize new units, is essential for a more complete grasp of the relationship between territorial administration and electoral politics. Such an inquiry will increase our knowledge of the

broader functioning of democracy within parliamentary regimes in the developing world.

Attention to political motives implies that the institutional setting is a key factor shaping the extent and type of administrative unit creation. The existing literature primarily explored the presidential systems of sub-Saharan Africa, where governments widely implemented administrative unit reforms (Grossman and Lewis, 2014). There are reasons to suspect that electoral dynamics of unit proliferation in parliamentary systems might be different compared to presidential systems (e.g., Carey et al., 2005; Saiegh et al., 2019). Specifically, government composition may complicate decisions on administrative unit proliferation via coalition dynamics and related electoral calculations in parliamentary systems. For example, a relatively secure president operating within predictable election cycles will evaluate the costs of territorial reforms differently from actors in a coalition government. Potentially shorter electoral time horizons, turnover risks, and constant negotiation of compromises among coalition partners take precedence in parliamentary systems. Our knowledge of administrative unit creation under such institutional constraints is lacking. This study fills this gap by examining

* Corresponding author.

Email addresses: muabus@syr.edu (M. Abus), ciftci@ksu.edu (S. Ciftci).

the joint effect of electoral motivations and government composition on the likelihood of creating new administrative units in parliamentary democracies. Such an inquiry broadens the empirical foundations of proliferation literature by addressing the unique institutional dynamics of these regimes.

We argue that because government policy output is a key performance indicator for voters in both single-party and coalition governments, the creation of new administrative units has appeal, as a new unit is among the most immediately visible public goods (Mani and Mukand, 2007). The incumbents must weigh long-term electoral consequences and consider whether the executive structure allows clear credit attribution (Tavits, 2007). Coalition elites also worry about how supporters will view compromises and whether voters can identify which partner delivered specific outcomes (Martin and Vanberg, 2020b; Fortunato, 2021). Forming a consensus that benefits all partners is complicated given uneven electoral gains expected from new units. Coalition governments thus face greater uncertainty in claiming credit (Kemahlioglu, 2008). Since voters will likely hold coalition parties collectively responsible (Adams et al., 2013, 3), highly visible and consequential policies such as territorial reform require additional scrutiny. Therefore, we contend that subnational unit creation is more frequent under single-party governments, where visibility and credit-claiming for electoral gain is clearer.

To further scrutinize our theory, we examine several corollary hypotheses. We propose that the effect of single-party governments on unit creation is conditional on electoral volatility. When political context ensures prolonged single-party rule, political elites will have fewer incentives to employ administrative unit proliferation. We also test how coalition size and ideological composition affect unit proliferation. Large coalition governments are less likely to create new units due to a complex decision-making environment. In contrast, ideologically disconnected coalitions are more likely to do so, as partners appealing to different electoral bases introduce clarity in credit attribution.

These theoretical expectations are best tested in a case which offers a long temporal scope including variations in government type and unit proliferation decisions. Our expectations concern parliamentary systems with a history of coalition governments in developing countries, where party systems have been weakly institutionalized over the long run. The wide discrepancy in subnational developmental patterns in developing country contexts make the benefits of proliferation particularly desirable and this renders the reform an effective tool with electoral consequences. Our study tests several hypotheses about government type and unit proliferation in the suitable case of Turkey using administrative split data from 1960 to 2018 ($n=12,883$), a period when the number of second-order administrative units (districts) increased by 63 percent. This era witnessed political instability, frequent coalitions, early elections, a single-party government in the 1980s, and the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) starting in 2002. The results show an increased pace of administrative unit proliferation under single-party governments under high electoral volatility and hence an increased chance of turnover. When turnover is infrequent, unit creation becomes less likely. We also find that smaller coalitions with ideologically distant partners are more likely to create new districts than large coalitions. These results remain robust across model specifications and after adding contextual variables. A case study of a northwestern Turkish province confirms the findings by revealing the details of the mechanisms we propose.

The results improve our understanding of the electoral motivations behind administrative unit proliferation and offer several additional contributions. First, we demonstrate how insights from the existing literature, often focused on presidential systems, can be applied to a different political context, emphasizing electoral fortunes and executive formation at the national level. Second, the inclusion of a new case with significant variation in the supply-side dynamics of administrative unit proliferation improves theory on this timely topic. Third, the analysis allows us to assess how changing executive structures and electoral

dynamics influence unit proliferation over time (Kemahlioglu, 2008; Ertugal, 2022). Finally, the findings shed light on how elite bargaining and electoral motivations, along with ethnic and socioeconomic factors, shape territorial governance (e.g., Hassan, 2016; Resnick, 2017) in a developing country with less institutionalized democratic norms.

2. Administrative unit proliferation

Unit proliferation is closely related to, but different from gerrymandering and decentralization. Unlike gerrymandering, unit proliferation involves an increase in the number of administrative units, and unlike decentralization, it does not require a transfer of power to local governments. Scholars have traditionally examined the creation of subnational administrative units through the lens of optimal efficiency and public service provision (Tiebout, 1956; Oates, 1972). Recent research has shifted focus to the political causes and consequences of the increasing number of administrative units in developing countries (Grossman and Lewis, 2014; Pierskalla, 2016; Hassan, 2016).

Changes in a polity's territorial organization can significantly impact the lives of citizens. Some benefits of new units include the establishment of additional state administrative capabilities providing easier access to government services (Kilinc and Gulersey, 2011; Hassan, 2016), increased central government funding, increased public employment opportunities for locals, and growth in the service sector. Although the optimal jurisdiction size represents a compromise between efficiency of service provision and citizens' well-being (Tiebout, 1956; Alesina and Spolaore, 1997; Krishan, 1988; Francis and James, 2003; Gomez-Reino et al., 2013; Hooghe and Marks, 2009; Pierskalla et al., 2019), Shepsle (1999) contends that focusing solely on technical considerations is misguided. These functionalist assumptions have faced growing criticism (Fitriani et al., 2005, 58; Green, 2011, 422; Hassan, 2016, 511; Kimura, 2013, 4; Mawdsley, 2002, 49; Yilmaz et al., 2010, 260), with increasing attention shifting to electoral motivations (Pierskalla et al., 2019, 148).

In some cases, incumbents may create subnational administrative units without explicitly seeking electoral gains. For example, unit creation can serve as a strategy to counter secessionist threats (Griffiths, 2015) or can be pursued to alter the social status quo when local interests are spatially concentrated (Malesky, 2009). Sometimes, it can be used to create public sector employment and co-opt elites in new units (Green, 2010), or it can be used to extend patronage networks (Kakumba, 2010; Pierskalla et al., 2019). However, the dominant perspective on unit creation prioritizes electoral gains through distributive mechanisms, particularly in developing countries. New subnational administrative units can serve as a means of rewarding supporters (Resnick, 2017; Suberu, 2001) or undermine strong opposition parties in electorally competitive regions (Grossman and Lewis, 2014, 211). Electoral motivations are central to unit creation, with incumbents often timing these decisions around competitive reelection campaigns, typically within the election year or shortly before it (Hassan, 2016; Aye, 2013). Even in less competitive elections, incumbents prioritize unit creation when it is electorally more rewarding (Hassan, 2016).¹

It remains unclear whether and how these insights generalize to parliamentary systems, where executive configurations introduce distinct dynamics. While presidential and parliamentary regimes may share similar electoral motivations, there is limited evidence regarding how insights from extant research apply to parliamentary systems characterized by diverse government types. In order to advance the literature on unit proliferation, we take the first step in this direction. In the next section, we provide a theoretical explanation and develop several hypotheses on how the interplay between electoral competition, government type, and coalition composition shapes administrative unit proliferation in parliamentary democracies.

¹ However, unit creation is costly and cannot be used continuously. Excessive proliferation complicates governance and results in new units with limited capacity due to reduced resources per unit (Hassan, 2016, 518).

3. Government type, electoral dynamics, and unit proliferation

In parliamentary systems, government formation reflects a dynamic interplay of factors such as negotiations, executive control, expected policy gains, and future electoral considerations (Müller et al., 2024; Laver and Geoffrey Pridham, 1986), a process described as “coalition life cycle” (Müller et al., 2008). Therefore, it is not just the formation and dissolution of governments that matter, but more importantly the policy outcomes that can improve or diminish the chances of reelection for governing parties.

The policy area we examine is unit proliferation. Single party governments can enact these reforms more quickly than coalition governments, which may be constrained by partners. Alongside other district level factors, the level of electoral uncertainty and support in a district matters for both types of governments. Coalition governments may also face limits on credit claiming in split districts. Larger coalitions with more ideologically connected parties can make credit claiming harder than smaller coalitions with lower ideological cohesion in a visible policy like administrative unit creation.

The creation of administrative units is a highly visible public good (Mani and Mukand, 2007), providing tangible benefits to voters and electoral advantages to parties.² However, its significant financial and institutional costs make it a risky choice. Incumbents must weigh these costs against the anticipated benefits. Since there are both winners and losers from a territorial reform decision, incumbents are forced to perform a comparative cost-benefit calculation regarding potential vote gains. This electoral dimension is the main anticipated benefit for the incumbent. When a government enacts a district split, it indicates that the anticipated vote gains are high enough to justify the institutional, financial, and electoral costs. We argue that such calculations are likely influenced by the type of government, the clarity of responsibility it provides, and credit-claiming potential for policy outcomes (Tavits, 2007; Kemahlioglu, 2008; Martin and Vanberg, 2020b). In general, single-party governments, characterized by greater policy coherence and streamlined processes, tend to make decisions faster, while coalition governments, with multiple veto players, often require greater consensus, leading to slower policy making (Tsebelis, 2002).

Hallerberg (2002) argues that veto players within political parties and coalition governments often necessitate negotiated compromises in policy shifts. Political fragmentation requires careful bargaining and calculated decision making (Martin and Vanberg, 2011, 2020a). Stable coalitions with longer time horizons are better positioned to implement territorial reforms (Bäck et al., 2024; Greene, 2017; Conrad and Golder, 2010), while short term coalitions and divergent goals complicate proliferation. Smaller partners may push for new units in areas of strength, producing geographically fragmented but balanced patterns. Uncertainty about future coalition arrangements further complicates decisions. Party elites are also deeply concerned about how coalition-based policies will be perceived by their supporters (Martin and Vanberg, 2020b; Fortunato, 2021). Because subnational unit creation is a visible public good, voters can more clearly attribute credit, increasing hesitancy among coalition partners. In contrast, single party governments equipped with clarity of responsibility and depicting less internal disagreement than coalitions, show greater policy coherence. This contrast suggests they are more likely to introduce new subnational units.

Hypothesis 1: Subnational unit creation is more likely under single-party governments than under coalition governments.

² Whereas district splits are seen as a negative event due to loss of clout and potential economic base, district creation is a coveted development due to the economic benefits that are expected to follow from such reforms. Unit proliferation is aimed at splitting districts where incumbents have lower support along the lines where they have the possibility of generating new units with higher levels of support. They aim to start with a clean but favorable slate in the new units.

Dynamic approaches to government formation in parliamentary systems further highlight the multiplicity of political motives within the life cycle of coalition governments (Müller et al., 2008, 2024). We can expect that visible but costly policies concerning territorial governance will be less likely under coalition governments, particularly in “ministerial-government” models where policy-making authority is fully allocated and clarity of responsibility is well-defined. This power is typically shaped by legislative bargaining and representatives’ expectations about their constituents (Martin and Vanberg, 2020b; Fortunato, 2021). Representatives seek to link themselves to district level benefits to claim credit. Research shows that the distribution of particularistic economic benefits follows the same logic of attribution and credit claiming through electoral connection in parliamentary systems (Kemahlioglu, 2008).

When single party governments face electoral volatility and signs of insecurity, they prioritize short term electoral gains. In such contexts, they are more likely to create new units in regions where their support is lower or where malapportionment offers an advantage by weakening the opposition. Conversely, during periods of prolonged electoral dominance, the need for costly unit creation diminishes. The ruling party may shift its focus to national economic and distributive policies rather than targeting the electoral geographies of local supporters. With a higher likelihood of reelection without additional electoral engineering, incumbents are less inclined to bear the financial burden of unit creation. Party representatives will also be reluctant to bear potential costs within their district that can be directly attributed to government policy. Thus, we anticipate that administrative unit proliferation will be less likely during periods of low electoral volatility. We might expect strategic targeting of districts for new unit creation during these periods.

In contrast, fluctuations in an incumbent’s vote share signal electoral volatility, introducing uncertainty about future electoral outcomes. This uncertainty may incentivize incumbents to engage in electoral engineering. Unit proliferation enables the ruling party to consolidate its position in regions with malapportionment advantages or to reward loyal constituencies (e.g., Suberu, 2001; Malesky, 2009; Hassan and Sheely, 2017), counterbalancing potential losses in less secure areas. Local representatives are likely to align with the party’s strategy in their dealings with constituents, particularly when such a strategy allows them to claim credit for benefits accruing to their district. Electoral uncertainty also increases the strategic value of subnational unit creation as a tool for fragmenting opposition support and redistributing resources in ways that benefit the incumbent party. Consequently, when an incumbent’s vote share remains relatively high within and across districts in consecutive elections, the likelihood of administrative unit proliferation will decrease.

Incumbents ultimately seek to raise their overall vote share, and gains in any district directly contribute to that total. In choosing where to split districts, incumbents also seek to secure local incumbency advantage. Recent work shows that local incumbency helps officeholders deliver targeted benefits and reap benefits in national elections (Kemahlioglu et al., 2018; Arbatli and Arbatli, 2025). If unit proliferation is a way for the incumbents to start with a favorable clean slate and use the reform to win local elections, then unit proliferation emerges as an integral mechanism that provides a potential link between local incumbency advantage and national elections. The following hypotheses follow this discussion.

Hypothesis 2a: Subnational unit creation is less likely under single-party governments in periods of low electoral uncertainty.

Hypothesis 2b: Subnational unit creation is less likely under single-party governments in districts where incumbents have relatively high vote share.

The size and ideological composition of coalition governments may also play a critical role in shaping decision-making dynamics on subnational unit creation. Large coalition governments operate in a

complex environment that slows decision making and blurs responsibility, making credit claiming harder for individual partners. In these settings, party leaders and legislative members are likely to share concerns about the potential risks of unit creation, such as destabilizing existing electoral advantages or failing to secure tangible rewards. As such, as the number of parties in a coalition government increases, the likelihood of unit proliferation should decrease.

Even ideologically cohesive coalitions face unique challenges that discourage unit creation. When ideologically overlapping parties make up the coalition, partners will be more willing to defect from existing coalitions (Maoz and Somer-Topcu, 2010, 830). While shared ideology might simplify policy alignment, it also leads to overlapping support bases among coalition partners, increasing the risk of credit misattribution by voters. Coalition members may therefore avoid creating new units to prevent strengthening a rival partner. New administrative units provide benefits to the residents of new districts, including economic development, enhanced public services, and improved allocation of state resources. However, the perceived costs of unit creation by coalition partners, such as the risk of diluting their electoral advantage, may outweigh the potential gains. Consequently, administrative unit proliferation becomes less appealing for ideologically connected coalition parties despite the possibility of electoral rewards.

Hypothesis 3a: Subnational unit creation is less likely under large coalition governments.

Hypothesis 3b: Subnational unit creation is less likely under ideologically connected coalition governments.

4. Unit proliferation in Turkey

Turkey is a highly centralized unitary state divided into 81 first-order administrative units, or provinces (*il*), which are further subdivided into 973 second-order administrative units, or districts (*ilçe*). These districts are the only subnational administrative units with defined borders and central government bureaucracy. They are the focus of unit proliferation analyzed in this study.

There are no explicit criteria for new district creation in Turkey, but relevant conditions are inferred to include geography, economic factors, and service requirements. The legislative branch has the authority to determine whether these criteria are met before reaching a verdict (Çimen, 2013, 345). The subnational administrative structure is governed by Law No. 5442 on Local Administration, which explicitly grants incumbents broad discretion in unit creation.³ The agency of incumbents therefore becomes central to administrative unit proliferation, making electoral dynamics highly significant in their decisions. The power held by subnational administrative units does not change as a result of these reforms, and Turkey remains a unitary state. There is no substantial shift in authority, as the newly created units hold the same administrative powers as the existing ones. What changes instead is electoral geography and the structure of patronage. Therefore, these reforms do not entail devolution of power in Turkish context.⁴

An example illustrates this discretion: The 50th government of Turkey (1993-1995) was a coalition government between two ideologically incongruent parties during a period of high electoral volatility. The local elections in Yalova, a district near Istanbul, were annulled, and a rerun was ordered. Amid intense campaigning, the prime minister, leader of the larger coalition partner, announced at a campaign rally just three days before the election that Yalova would become Turkey's 77th

province.⁵ This example shows how territorial reforms can be rapidly enacted when political conditions align with the expectations outlined in our theory.

Elite bargaining and top-down decision making is also evident in the content of the bills. Çimen (2013) found that only 1.17 percent of the proposals for district creation submitted between 2000 and 2006 are directly related to voter demands (Çimen, 2013, 353). The analysis of the official reasons for district creation in proposals submitted to the Grand National Assembly in the last two decades shows that decision makers did not meaningfully rely on them (Çimen, 2013, 360–363). Kilinc and Gulersoy (2011) examine the official reasons given for the creation of the 14 provinces between 1989 and 1999 and find that the decisions to turn districts into provinces are not supported by systematic factors, although references are made to development and population.

The strong demand for new administrative units shows that the benefits that accrue from such reforms are highly coveted. Since the supply of new administrative units is limited and incumbents have wide discretion over these decisions, territorial reforms emerge as a strategic tool for electoral targeting. 129 districts had applications to become provinces as of 2006 (Kilinc and Gulersoy, 2011, 1575). The absence of new provinces during the AKP period, despite strong demand, illustrates our expectation that a secure single party government is reluctant to assume the high costs of province creation. A total of 558 bills were submitted for district creation beginning with the 20th legislative session (1995) and ending with the 27th legislative session (2018). Out of these 558 bills, only 5 became law as a result of deliberations within the Grand National Assembly. Incumbents created 73 new districts over the same period through cabinet resolutions.⁶

An important aspect of unit proliferation is the creation of local government units (municipalities) in the districts. Municipalities provide an important local advantage in terms of providing benefits to constituents and mobilizing local party organizations to prepare for national elections (e.g., Kemahloğlu et al., 2018; Kemahloğlu and Bayer, 2021; Arbatli and Arbatli, 2025). When incumbents split districts where their support is relatively low to create units in which they expect stronger backing, they initiate a process that gives them an advantage in local elections through the benefits accruing to the new district. The local incumbency advantage that they may subsequently enjoy during national elections (e.g., Kemahloğlu et al., 2018; Arbatli and Arbatli, 2025), therefore, potentially starts with the unit proliferation process.⁷

Apart from unit proliferation, territorial reforms encompass other aspects of subnational administration, such as the merger and disbanding of municipalities, the reclassification of municipalities as metropolitan municipalities, and the elevation of districts to province status.⁸ Notably, none of these reforms involve the merging of districts, and, in practice, tend to increase the number of districts. For example, both the mergers of municipalities in 2008 and the establishment of 14 new metropolitan municipalities in 2012⁹ increased the number of districts. Against this background, our focus is on the splitting of larger units (districts), and we treat mergers of smaller units as a separate process. Most mergers involved small sub-district (*belde*) municipalities, and this process is not equivalent to dividing a large unit into several parts that

⁵ <https://haberci.com.tr/iki-7-yan-yana-77/> (Accessed 15 December 2024).

⁶ The records of past bills can be found at <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/Yasama/Gecmis-Kanun-Teklifleri>.

⁷ The central government appoints the local administrators (*kaymakam*) to districts, but for local governments there are mayoral elections.

⁸ The natural complement to proliferation, namely consolidation, is missing from this discussion. This is because we do not observe unit consolidation in our dataset, suggesting that consolidation is not widely used to reward constituencies. In other contexts, second order administrative units might be subject to consolidation, mostly for efficiency gains, as is widely observed in Europe.

⁹ The full text of Law No. 5747 and Law No. 6360 can be found at <https://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/MevzuatMetin/1.5.5747.pdf> and <https://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/MevzuatMetin/1.5.6360.pdf>, respectively.

³ The full text of Law No. 5442 can be found at <https://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/mevzuatmetin/1.3.5442.pdf>.

⁴ In contrast, studies show that devolution to regions to accommodate autonomy and independence claims is a strategy used by mainstream parties in Europe. (e.g., Meguid, 2018; Alonso, 2012).

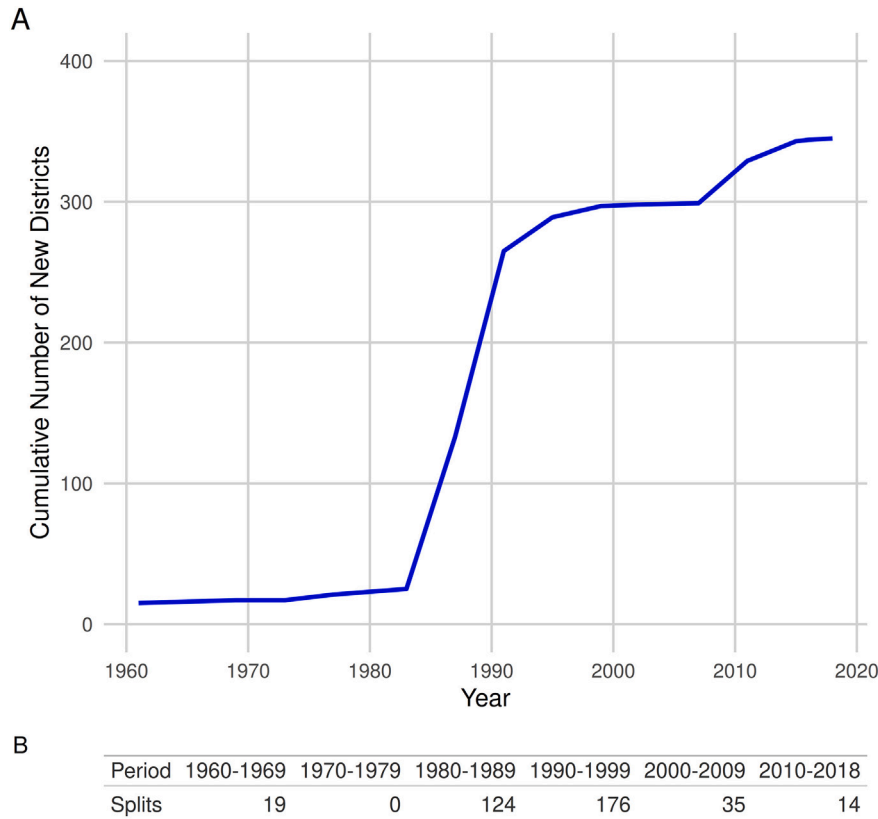


Fig. 1. Administrative unit proliferation in Turkey, 1960–2018. Note: The plot shows the cumulative number of new districts created between 1960 and 2018 (A) and the number of districts created per decade (B).

remain second-level subnational units. Newly created districts enter the dataset and are analyzed like any other unit, but our main interest is in larger units being split.

Finally, the timing of district splits also suggests an interplay of government type and electoral dynamics as outlined in our theory. Between 1960 and 1969, 95% of all district splits occurred either in the election year or in the year preceding it. The same figures for the 1980–1989 and 1990–1999 periods are 87% and 85%, respectively. In the 2000s, none of the district splits occurred in an election year or the previous year. These patterns suggest that AKP’s dominant party status reduced electoral uncertainty and, in turn, lowered incentives to undertake costly reforms on the eve of elections.

The temporal and spatial distribution of unit proliferation provides support for our claim that incumbents do not randomly create new districts. When we look at data that spans six decades, we clearly see that there is an interaction between government type and associated constraints that results in certain types of districts splitting. One does not happen independently of other, so they are not isolated causal processes. Fig. 1 shows cumulative administrative unit creation by decade. Remarkably, between 1970 and 1979 there were no new district splits in Turkey. This is not because districts similar to those split in other periods did not exist during this period. Rather, this period is marked by larger and ideologically connected coalitions, making unit proliferation decisions very difficult. The two decades after 1980 are marked by single-party governments under electoral uncertainty, coalitions of various sizes and levels of ideological cohesion.¹⁰ This resulted in a period of

¹⁰ The military coup on 12 September 1980 led to a period of military rule until the general elections on 6 November 1983. During this time, there was just two district split decisions (on 21 January 1982).

extensive administrative reforms. The period after 2000 corresponds to AKP rule, during which the party quickly achieved electoral dominance unlike earlier single party governments. Therefore, their approach to district creation shows more restraint due to their secure incumbent status. The patterns can be observed temporally in Fig. 1 and spatially in Fig. 2. The increase in number of districts based on 973 units in 2018 corresponds to a 63 percent increase from the start of our study period in 1960. When we consider that changes in administrative setup of a country affects citizens’ interaction with the state, the magnitude of proliferation as shown here becomes starker.

5. Data and analysis

5.1. Measurement & data

We constructed a panel dataset with district-election year as the unit of analysis, comprising a total of 12,883 observations. Due to data availability, the analysis covers the period from 1960 to 2018, concluding with Turkey’s transition from a parliamentary to a presidential system.

To code our dependent variable, *district splits*, we compiled a list of districts created between 1960 and 2018. The laws by which these districts are formed are recorded in the Official Gazette, which reports the date, the name of the created district, and a list of territorial units annexed to the new district from other districts. Since new districts are created by splitting an existing “mother” district, we code our dependent variable as 1 in instances where a district has been split to generate new units. There are instances when multiple districts are split to form a new district. We code all such districts also as split districts. When the creation of a new district does not necessarily involve district splits such as the change in status of districts that are attached to a new metropolitan municipality, our dependent variable is coded as zero. Fifty-seven

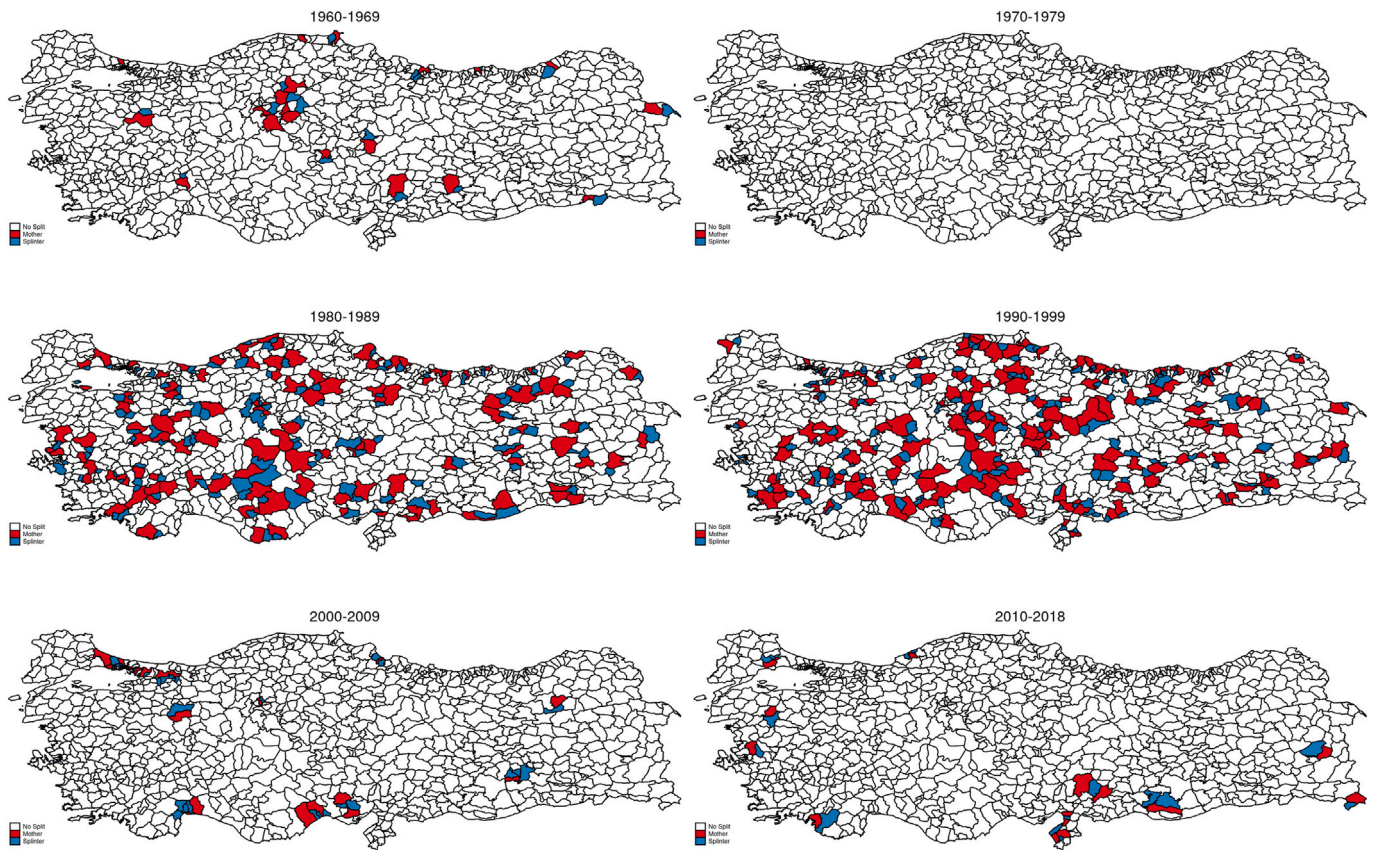


Fig. 2. Administrative unit proliferation in Turkey, 1960–2018. Note: The maps show the distribution of splinter districts together with their mother districts in Turkey.

districts in our data were split more than once. Of the new districts, seventeen were subsequently split.¹¹

The first group of independent variables measure government type and electoral dynamics. The second group includes the complementary factors at the district level that may influence district split decisions. The last group consists of developmental controls.

Government type is coded as either single-party or coalition. We measure *coalition size* with the number of parties in a coalition and assess *ideological cohesion*¹² by calculating the difference between the right-left scores of the most extreme coalition parties based on the Manifesto Project dataset (Lehmann et al., 2024).¹³ High values show decreasing ideological connectedness within a coalition. We also employ several variables to account for the electoral dynamics related to government type. We use the classical measure of *electoral volatility*, Pedersen index, which measures the difference in the vote shares of parties from one election to the next. As parties can be expected to react to their most recent electoral experience, we use the lagged version of this variable in

the analysis. The third variable within this group is *incumbent vote share* at the district level.

We also include several other district and electoral factors in the models. First, we employ a dichotomous measure of *ethnic majority*, using district level data from Tezcur (2016). Since incentives and expectations in ethnic majority districts may shift if voters have an ethnic alternative, we also use a binary variable to capture whether an *ethnic party* is competing in the election.¹⁴ Another variable, *electoral disproportionality* captures the imbalance between vote share and seat share. This indicator could influence incumbents' calculations regarding further malapportionment through the creation of new units. Additionally, the *district margin of victory* provides insight into the district level competitiveness. This variable is calculated independently of the parties occupying the first two places nationally, ensuring that the influence of regional parties that capture a significant share of votes is not overlooked.

The models also include controls for the temporal effect of district creation and party competition. We expect that a district split in the preceding election cycle will interfere with the probability of a split in the next election period. While it might be harder or easier to split a district that was just split, the probability will not be the same as with a district that was never split. We account for this dynamic by including a lagged variable indicating whether the district was split in the preceding election cycle (*district split lag*). Finally, to control for the influence of partisanship within districts, particularly along the important left-right

¹¹ We take up these districts in robustness checks in supplemental material.

¹² When there is change in coalition between elections, the coalition variables are measured so that the exact coalition formation at the time of district split is recorded.

¹³ Both *coalition size* and *coalition ideological connectedness* variables are coded as zero for single-party governments. This simplifies the tests of hypotheses. For instance, thanks to this coding, when we set out to test Hypothesis 3a, we do not need a multiplicative interaction term involving the *government type* variable as only the observations for coalition governments will have values. Furthermore, multiplicative interaction terms with two variables can be used instead of a three-way interaction, simplifying the interpretation of the results.

¹⁴ This strategy allows us to test the ethnic marginalization thesis, which suggests that unit proliferation may be more likely in ethnically marginalized regions due to local demand or the political motives of the national elite (Suberu, 1991; Grossman and Lewis, 2014; Pierskalla, 2016).

Table 1
Descriptive statistics.

	Obs.	Mean	Standard deviation	Min.	Max.	Dummies: count = 1
Single-party	12,246	0.619	0.485	0	1	7587
Coalition	12,246	0.38	0.485	0	1	4659
Lagged (t-1) electoral volatility	12,883	31.83	18.59	9.85	64.15	
Incumbent vote share	12,883	43.81	26.18	0	100	
Coalition size	12,883	1.16	1.68	2	5	
Coalition ideological connectedness	12,246	9.72	16.95	0	56.6	
Electoral disproportionality	12,883	9.55	6.39	1.99	27.06	
District margin of victory	12,883	22.14	18.18	0	96.4	
Lagged vote share of right parties	11,912	66.94	17.4	1.7	98.8	
District split lag	12,883	0.026	0.161	0	1	345
Age of district	12,883	49.23	27	0	95	
Ethnic majority district	12,883	0.121	0.32	0	1	1564
Ethnic party contesting	12,883	0.5	0.49	0	1	6555
Share of rural population	12,658	0.58	0.23	0.0005	0.96	
ln(district population)	12,872	10.52	1.09	7.32	14.09	
Time trend	12,883	9.28	4.52	1	16	

political cleavage in Turkey (e.g., Çarkoğlu, 2012), we include the *lagged vote share of right parties* in the district.

The third group of variables comprises developmental controls. The first variable is the *age of the district* which captures the long term effects of development. The second control is *district population*. Districts with higher populations should be more conducive to splitting. Third, we include the *share of rural population* in the models.¹⁵ The dataset spans 16 general elections from 1961 to 2018. To account for any secular trends in the data, we include a linear time trend variable, assigning values from 1 to 16 corresponding to each election. In this way, we control for factors that can increase or decrease in magnitude over time.

Table 1 summarizes the data in our panel. We use additional variables and model specifications for robustness checks. Summary statistics for these extra variables as well as coding decisions for all variables used in the analysis and robustness checks are provided in the supplemental material.

The outcome variable is binary and we estimate random intercept logistic regression models to account for unobserved heterogeneity across clusters. This is a design choice widely employed in unit proliferation literature (Grossman and Lewis, 2014). The model can be formally expressed as:

$$\text{logit}(P(y_{ij} = 1)) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{1tj} + \beta_2 t + \epsilon_{ij},$$

where, y_{ij} is the dependent variable indicating whether the district was split at election t . $\beta_1 X_{1tj}$ represents predictor variables at the district level at election t including government type, electoral variables, and developmental controls. $\beta_2 t$ is the linear time trend, and ϵ_{ij} is the residual error at the district level.

5.2. Results

Table 2 presents the estimation results from five models.¹⁶ There are two reasons for presenting separate models for single-party and coalition governments. First, the number of observations for these models are different and presenting fewer models would result in observations being dropped. Second, we have both conditional and unconditional hypotheses for each government type. The conditional

¹⁵ The rural share has not been recorded since 2012 for the provinces that were reorganized as metropolitan municipalities. For the districts affected, we follow Yildirim (2024) and use the rural vote share of 2011 for the subsequent years.

¹⁶ The effective sample size is smaller than the N reported in Table 1 because of the lagged dependent variable.

Table 2
Administrative unit proliferation in Turkey, 1960–2018.

	I	II	III	IV	V
Single-party government	2.41*** (0.22)	-1.59** (0.66)	3.60*** (0.47)		
Single-party government × Lagged (t-1) electoral volatility		0.14*** (0.02)			
Incumbent vote share (district)			0.01 (0.01)		
Single-party government × Incumbent vote share (district)			-0.03*** (0.01)		
Coalition size				-2.34*** (0.26)	-2.58*** (0.32)
Coalition ideological connectedness				0.17*** (0.02)	0.31*** (0.05)
Coalition size × Coalition ideological connectedness					-0.03*** (0.01)
Lagged (t-1) electoral volatility	0.02*** (0.00)	-0.11*** (0.02)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)
Electoral disproportionality index	0.08*** (0.01)	0.12*** (0.02)	0.09*** (0.02)	0.13*** (0.02)	0.13*** (0.02)
District margin of victory	-0.02*** (0.00)	-0.01*** (0.00)	-0.01** (0.01)	-0.01** (0.00)	-0.01* (0.00)
Lagged vote share of Right parties	0.02*** (0.01)	0.02*** (0.01)	0.03*** (0.01)	0.02*** (0.01)	0.02*** (0.01)
District split lag	-0.05 (0.23)	-0.16 (0.23)	-0.08 (0.23)	-0.10 (0.23)	-0.16 (0.23)
Share of rural population (district)	0.02 (0.38)	0.03 (0.38)	-0.09 (0.38)	0.02 (0.38)	0.05 (0.38)
Ethnic majority district	-0.45** (0.21)	-0.49** (0.22)	-0.55** (0.22)	-0.50** (0.22)	-0.52** (0.22)
Ethnic party contesting in election	1.33*** (0.17)	1.54*** (0.18)	1.21*** (0.21)	1.70*** (0.20)	1.61*** (0.20)
ln(District population)	0.76*** (0.09)	0.77*** (0.09)	0.75*** (0.09)	0.77*** (0.09)	0.78*** (0.09)
Age of district	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)
Time trend	-0.22*** (0.03)	-0.19*** (0.03)	-0.20*** (0.03)	-0.21*** (0.03)	-0.20*** (0.03)
Observations	11,103	11,103	11,103	11,092	11,092
AIC	2142	2105	2134	2086	2077

Standard errors in parentheses. Random intercept logistic regression models where a dichotomous variable tracking whether a district split is the dependent variable. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

hypotheses require multiplicative interaction terms, which cannot be interpreted jointly with main effects when variables appear in interactions (Brambor et al., 2006). Therefore, we present our results in Table 2 in five separate models, two of which do not include an interaction term.

The first three models focus on single-party governments, while the last two test the implications of the theory for coalition governments. The results show that splits are significantly more likely under single-party governments than coalition governments (Hypothesis 1). The interaction term in the second model shows that under single party governments electoral volatility increases the likelihood of district proliferation (Hypothesis 2a). The interaction term in our third model confirms that single-party governments are less likely to split districts where they have relatively high levels of support (Hypothesis 2b).

To show the substantive effects of these results, we calculate the predicted probability of district splits for electoral volatility and incumbent vote share given the presence of a single party government. For

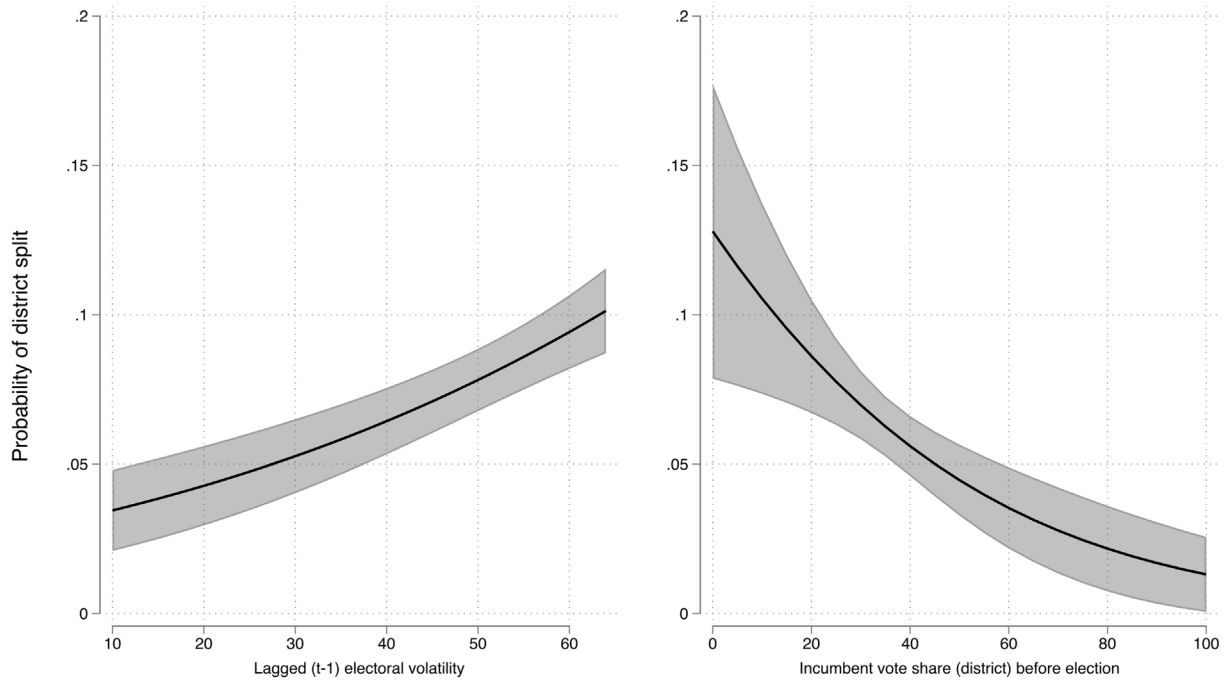


Fig. 3. Electoral volatility, incumbent vote share, and district splits. Note: The plots show the effects of electoral volatility and incumbent vote share on the probability of district splits under single-party governments.

these probabilities, we use the full range of interaction variables. Fig. 3 shows the predicted probability of district splits under single-party governments in two panels. In the left panel, we plot the probability at different values of electoral volatility and in the right panel we plot the probabilities at different values of incumbent vote share at the district level. We use a common y-axis to improve visual comparison.

Electoral volatility ranges from 9.85 to 64.15 in the dataset. Holding all else constant, a 10-unit increase in this indicator (approximately a 20% increase) raises the probability of district splits under single-party governments by about 1%. This effect becomes more pronounced as electoral volatility increases, with the same 10-unit change leading to more than 2% increase in the probability of district splits when the electoral volatility is over 50. Finally, the complete range of the magnitude is 6.5% increase in probability of district splits when we move from the lowest possible turnover to the highest value in the data.

District vote share for single-party governments ranges from 0% to 100%. The results show that, holding all else constant, single-party governments are less likely to split districts where they enjoy higher levels of support. Substantively, a 20% increase in incumbent support at the district level reduces the probability of a district split by 6% when support is relatively low. These effects become less pronounced as support for the incumbent increases, with the same 20% increase corresponding to a 1% decrease in likelihood of a district split when incumbent support is very high, at 80%. The complete range of the magnitude is 16% decrease in probability of district split as we move from the lowest possible vote share to the highest across districts.

We test our theoretical expectations about the size and ideological cohesion of coalition governments in our fourth model in Table 2. Coalition size has a negative effect on district split decisions under coalition governments (Hypothesis 3a). Increasing ideological distance among coalition parties facilitates district splits (Hypothesis 3b). This aligns with our expectation that ideological disconnection incentivizes coalition partners to prioritize their regional interests, increasing the likelihood of district splits.

We also consider an observable implication of our theory. When a coalition is smaller and its members are ideologically disconnected,

decisions can be made relatively easily, and credit attribution is clearer. This should increase the probability of district splits compared to a large coalition with ideologically connected members. In Fig. 4, we present the predicted probability of district splits under coalition governments as coalition size and coalition ideological connectedness change. On the left panel, we plot the probability as coalition ideological connectedness changes. On the right panel, we plot the same probability, but break it down by small and large coalitions. The ideological distance in a coalition government ranges from 2 to 56 in the dataset, with higher values indicating decreasing ideological cohesion. This figure also has a common y-axis to improve visual comparison.

As coalition ideological distance increases, district splits become more likely (Hypothesis 3b). All else constant, we see on the left panel that until the distance in the coalition reaches 1/3 of the range, the coalition parties do not engage in unit proliferation. As the ideological distance passes the 1/3 mark, we see that it has an increasing effect on the probability of district splits. Substantively, decreasing ideological cohesion up to the value of 20 (corresponding to 35% of the possible range in connectedness) corresponds to a 1% probability of a district split. However, for values exceeding 40, where ideological cohesion is minimal, the probability of district splits rises dramatically. Moving from an ideological distance score of 40 to 50 increases the probability of a district split by 12%. Finally, the theoretical range of the magnitude is 41% increase in likelihood of district split as we move from the most ideologically cohesive coalition to the least. These results underscore the substantial impact of ideological cohesion on coalition behavior regarding administrative unit proliferation.

The right panel in Fig. 4 shows the predicted probability of district splits under our conditional expectation as both coalition size and ideological cohesion change. We use 2 to denote a small coalition and 5 to denote a large coalition corresponding to the observed range in the data. For small coalitions, a 10-unit decrease in ideological cohesion (17% of total range) corresponds to a 5% change in probability of district split. Starting from the value of 20, ideological distance is an increasing function for the probability of district splits under small coalitions. The theoretical maximum value for the magnitude is 60% probability of a

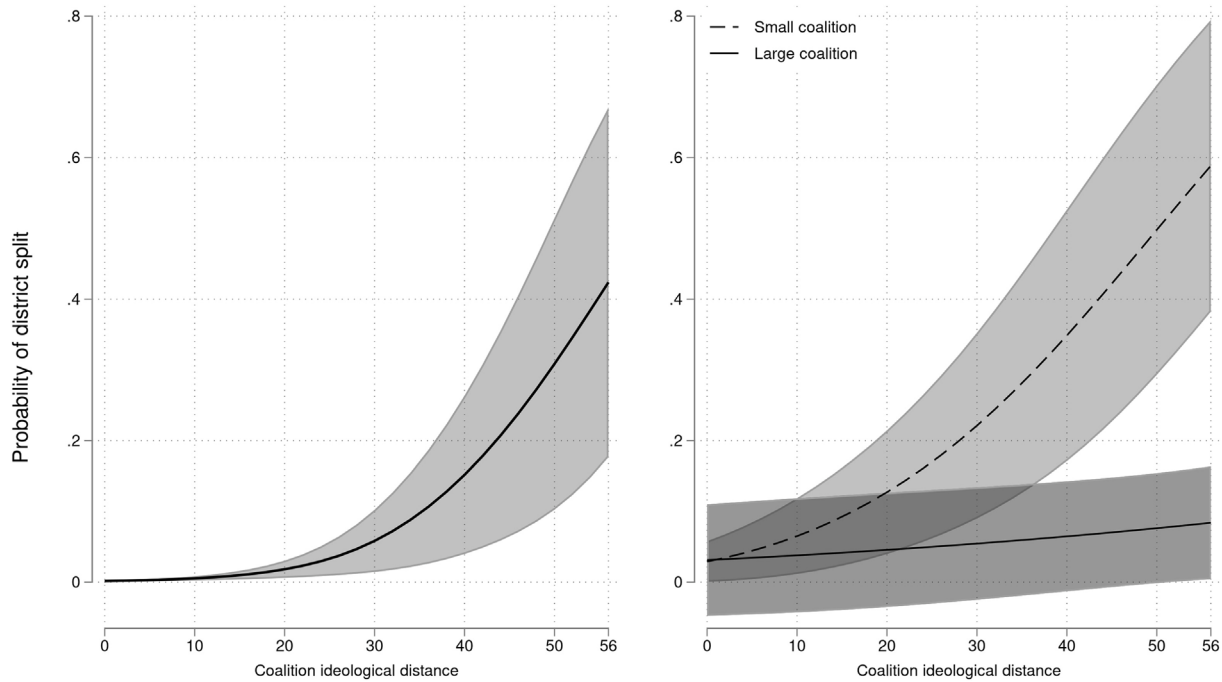


Fig. 4. Coalition size, ideological connectedness, and district splits. Note: The plots show the effect of coalition ideological connectedness and the moderating effect of coalition size on the probability of district splits under coalition governments.

district split in a small coalition with the maximum ideological distance. In contrast, large coalitions exhibit a flat probability line, indicating difficulty in reaching decisions even as ideological cohesion diminishes.

Finally, an examination of the control variables reveals that electoral disproportionality at the country level and margin of victory and vote share of Right parties at the district level have consistent effects on district splits. Age of district and its population also have consistent effects. The presence of an ethnic majority in a district has a negative effect on splits. However, the presence of an ethnic party contesting elections increases the likelihood of unit proliferation.

5.3. Case study

To illustrate the mechanism behind these statistical effects, we focus on the northwestern province of Zonguldak, which experienced successful industrialization during the contemporary period. Extensive coal mines and some of the early large steel enterprises supported and attracted a working-class population. Although the importance of coal mines decreased over time, the province retained its industrial background with a large working class. Its steel enterprises and proximity to the main industrial zones gave it an outsized effect on the national economy, and the resources also supported higher education levels. Consequently, Zonguldak has consistently shown strong support for left parties, while right-wing parties never established electoral control over the province despite their national dominance.

In the aftermath of the military rule (1980-1983), the same pattern persisted. The right-wing Motherland Party (ANAP) won the 1983 election, but placed second in Zonguldak, trailing the leftist People's Party (HP). Due to its economic importance, the province became a prized political target and was subjected to extensive territorial reforms. Six new districts were created, and two new provinces were carved out of Zonguldak. These reforms were enacted unevenly, with certain periods marked by heightened activity. This pattern aligns with our theoretical expectations. Specifically, we can see that local party support, government type, ideological cohesion, coalition size, and electoral constraints jointly shape how territorial reforms unfolded in Zonguldak as presented below.

For example, consistent with our expectation that incumbents are less likely to target areas where they enjoy strong support, Zonguldak became a natural target for the waves of unit proliferation initiated by ANAP and later pursued by other right-wing parties, including the True Path Party (DYP) and AKP.

After the political turmoil of the 1970s, ANAP formed a single-party government following the 1983 election. Their grip on power was tentative from the outset, as their overall support began to erode. Under these conditions, a single-party government facing electoral uncertainty, we would expect ANAP to create new districts, and this is what we observe. Before the 1987 election, they created three districts: Amasra, Yenice and Alaplı. Despite these reforms, the incumbent vote share continued to decline nationally after this election, increasing the uncertainty under which they operated. Consistent with our theory, they pursued further reforms before the next election in 1991. This heightened need for electoral support led them to enact reforms in the election year or immediately before it. They created the district of Gökçeşey in 1990 and, just before the 1991 election, established a new province (Bartın) out of four districts of Zonguldak. Fig. 5 provides maps for the districts and provinces created in Zonguldak between 1987 and 2012.

In contrast to the previous decade, the 1990s were marked by coalition governments, political instability, and uncertain election cycles. Parties thus operated under greater electoral uncertainty. While this would lead us to expect more territorial reforms, parties were also constrained by government type. Consistent with our expectations, reform decisions were shaped by coalition size and ideological connectedness. The next territorial reform in Zonguldak emerged under these conditions in 1995, under a coalition between the right-wing DYP and the left-wing Republican People's Party (CHP). This minimal coalition, with low ideological connectedness, facilitated credit claiming. On the eve of the 1995 election, this coalition created another province (Karabük) by combining six districts. Regardless of their specific electoral calculations, the coalition structure allowed the parties to appeal to non-overlapping constituencies, enabling the reform.

The era of coalition governments ended with the AKP's first victory in 2002. Following this, the party won successive elections throughout

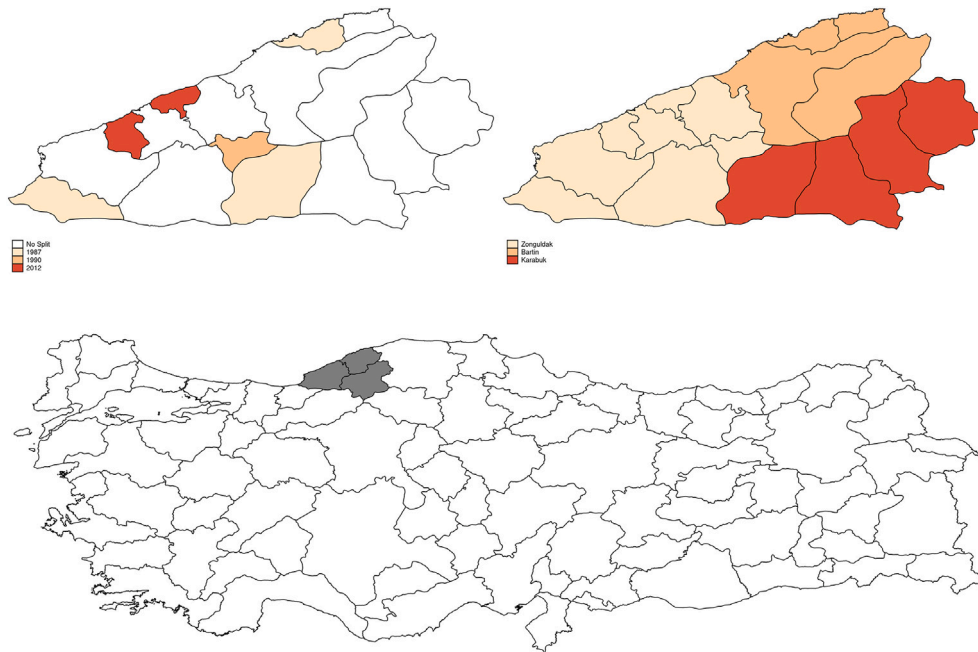


Fig. 5. Administrative unit proliferation experience in a Turkish province (Zonguldak), 1987–2012. Note: The upper left map shows the three districts created in 1987 (ANAP), one in 1990 (ANAP), and two in 2012 (AKP) in the province of Zonguldak. The upper right map shows two new provinces carved from Zonguldak in 1991 (ANAP) and 1995 (DYP-CHP). The bottom map shows the location of the affected area within Turkey.

the period under study, producing a different structure of incentives and constraints. After its third victory in 2011, it operated under historically low electoral uncertainty. Consistent with our expectations, this dominant party status reduced pressure to undertake costly reforms and allowed the AKP to act more strategically in pursuing them. The next reform came after the 2011 election. Despite its weakened state, the province's central district remained a stronghold for CHP. In response, the AKP created two districts out of the “problematic” central district, aiming to consolidate support and turn these units into party strongholds. At a minimum, this allowed the party to establish new jurisdictions on a favorable clean slate. As a result, the reduced central district became more competitive, while the two new districts increasingly emerged as incumbent strongholds with comfortable margins. This was a strategic reform by an incumbent that was under no pressure to undertake it.

The example of Zonguldak, thus, provides ample evidence about how government type, ideological cohesion, and electoral motives shape unit proliferation in a parliamentary system.

5.4. Robustness

To ensure our results are not artifacts of specific estimation and modeling choices, we conducted several robustness checks. First, the dataset includes districts that were split multiple times to create new districts, as well as newly created districts that were later split during the study period. Thus, two types of districts were affected more than once by unit proliferation. To account for this, we performed three separate analyses. First, we excluded the first group of districts and reran the models. Next, we excluded the second group and reran the models. Finally, we removed all districts affected more than once and tested the models on this subset of the data.

Second, we address the effects of governments' time horizons and perceptions of electoral prospects. We run the same models with lag (t-2) of electoral volatility. Third, to further examine the impact of development beyond what was covered in the paper, we included GDP per capita as another indicator for socio-economic development.

Our fourth robustness check is about coalition ideological cohesion. We initially did not apply any weighting for coalition party sizes. To

test the sensitivity of our findings, we recalculated ideological cohesion using a weighted measure and reran the coalition models with this alternative variable. Fifth, we assessed whether our results were robust to an explanation based on path dependency by controlling for the distance of districts to Istanbul. Sixth, we substituted the time trend variable with a decade variable to control for the effect of unobserved systemic changes specific to decades.

Our final robustness checks are related to factors at the national level. Government type does not vary within election years, leaving us with sixteen effective cases, so residuals are likely correlated within election years. While we employ the conventional approach in the unit proliferation literature, namely a random effects model in the main analysis, we also estimate mixed effects logistic models and cluster standard errors by election year to account for national level variables that are constant within elections. Finally, since district creation may depend on economic expansion to fund additional units, we estimate additional models controlling for national GDP growth. Our results remain robust across these checks, and we report these estimates in the supplemental material.

6. Conclusion

Administrative unit proliferation is common in developing countries, with significant policy implications. Scholars have studied this reform mostly in presidential systems with varying levels of democratic institutionalization. These studies are largely limited to cases in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia (e.g., Green, 2010; Grossman and Lewis, 2014; Pierskalla, 2016; Hassan, 2016; Hassan and Sheely, 2017; Resnick, 2017). Electoral motives have emerged as a main explanatory factor for territorial reforms in these studies. As evidence about the determinants of these reforms in parliamentary systems remains limited, we draw on insights from presidential cases to analyze unit proliferation under variation in government type. In this study, we develop a new theory explaining how electoral dynamics drive this process in parliamentary systems—specifically in developing countries—testing it in the case of Turkey. The Turkish case presents significant variation in government types and system-level characteristics. Using an original dataset of 12,883 district-election observations from 1960 to 2018, we found strong support for our theoretical propositions: Single-party

governments are more likely to create new administrative units than coalition governments, thanks to clearer credit-claiming and streamlined decision-making. Frequent government turnover also incentivizes single party governments to create new administrative units due to electoral uncertainty they face. Infrequent turnover has the opposite effect, and our analysis suggests this outcome is more likely under single-party dominance, which in some cases may coincide with democratic erosion. Single-party governments avoid splitting districts where they already have strong electoral support, since the costs of reform may outweigh potential gains. The analysis advances scholarship on administrative unit proliferation by revealing how coalition governments drive it through elite bargaining, electoral incentives, and expected territorial reform outcomes.

The results show how new unit creation can be hampered under coalition governments in parliamentary systems, and how single-party governments may deliberately avoid such proliferation when their electoral fortunes are secure. Such scenarios carry costs, as smaller administrative units can enhance public goods provision by mimicking decentralization effects seen in federal systems. Hypothetically, a single-party government with infrequent turnover resembles a secure president in a non-democratic system, whereas a coalition government parallels a president facing electoral uncertainty in a presidential democracy. This contrast helps generalize our insights across institutional settings, highlighting both the commonalities and differences in outcomes between presidential and parliamentary systems. The results also imply that administrative unit proliferation can further enhance patronage opportunities, offering another pathway to electoral advantage.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first long-term study of administrative unit proliferation in a parliamentary system in a developing country with a weakly institutionalized party system. We provide a framework for interested scholars to further expand the scope of unit proliferation literature to additional cases and advance theory development. This is an essential area of inquiry, as we still need to understand the broader applicability and potential modifications of the theory presented here. Single-party governments engage in district splits as an adaptive strategy to manage electoral risks and consolidate power, while coalition governments navigate a complex interplay of size, cohesion, and individual party incentives. Such political strategies will be conditioned by systemic factors like the extent of democracy, authoritarian shifts, and stability of government.

Future work could also integrate other factors, such as international pressures, fiscal considerations, or the role of civil society, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of administrative unit creation in parliamentary systems. Comparative analyses of parliamentary and presidential systems, using similar long-term datasets, could provide additional insights about distinct mechanisms driving administrative restructuring. Further comparative analyses utilizing the Regional Authority Index (Shair-Rosenfield et al., 2021; Hooghe et al., 2016) could evaluate the theory developed here within a multilevel governance framework. Finally, the substantive effects of unit proliferation on governance outcomes, such as service delivery and quality of public administration warrant deeper exploration by future studies.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Murat Abus: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Sabri Ciftci:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at doi:10.1016/j.electstud.2026.103087.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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