

Conclusions

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1 Taking Stock of Party Switching

This book is motivated by the belief that party switching is an important phenomenon, neither as idiosyncratic nor as noxious as the general perception suggests. The extant literature tends to either neglect party switching or treat it as an aberration. In a sense, this is understandable. At first blush, it seems illogical or self-defeating for a politician whose career and fortunes are bound to a particular party to even consider defecting from that party and joining another. It is all too easy to view party switching as confined to special conditions, as hold for example in new democracies, transitional party systems, or weak party organizations. Yet as the contributions to this volume make abundantly clear, changes of party affiliation among elected politicians occur in virtually all legislatures and party systems. Party switching varies in frequency but it is ubiquitous. As one consequence of strategic behavior, moreover, it is both systematic and predictable. Further, as emphasized in the Introduction, the presumption that switching is anomalous and rare belies the extent of its implications, its causes, and its effects.

Party switching is significant not because it is more common and more systematic than the conventional wisdom suggests, but rather because of what it reveals about politics and what we can learn from it. The theoretical, empirical, and normative importance of party switching emerges when it is seen as the product of strategic choice in a larger game. As such, legislators' decisions on party affiliation must be viewed in the context of their relationships with their parties—or party leaders—and voters; these relationships in turn are contingent on the nature of the legislative party system. For their part, legislative party systems can change in important ways as a consequence of switching (see, e.g., Laver and Benoit 2003; Kato and Yamamoto this volume), hence affecting the legislative bargaining context for interparty interactions and, in turn, the views that voters have of parties, the constraints and incentives facing party leaders, and

the factors motivating an individual legislator's decision to switch or stay put.

In a way, then, the conventional wisdom has it right in that party switching must be considered in light of the circumstances in which it occurs. The context, however, is strategic: Potential switchers take action (or not) depending on the panorama before them, and also on their expectations about whether and how their actions and others' responses will alter that panorama. The focus throughout this volume on *individual* actions and motivations thus makes party switching more than an interesting and important phenomenon. The fundamentally strategic nature of party switching by ambitious politicians means that analysis of switching provides new and effective leverage for understanding changes in policy outcomes, the evolution of party systems, and myriad other aspects of the larger political setting. Politics is about choices, and choices are made by individuals, albeit in the context of institutional or institutionally relevant factors like aggregation rules (Riker 1982), party discipline (Heller and Mershon 2008), socioeconomic concerns (Desposato 2006), and electoral rules (Cox 1997; Desposato 2006).

Strategic interaction is the purview of game-theoretic analysis, and party switching is indeed part of a larger game, as stressed in Chapter 2. The game itself is complex and, we suspect, probably intractable given available analytical technologies. All the same, the contributions to this volume investigate switching in the context of different pieces of the game, and in the aggregate they demonstrate not only how the study of switching can enrich understanding of the political world, but also how the pieces of the switching game depicted in Figure 2.1 fit together. That switchers move with an eye to elections, for example, is amply documented in the chapters by Scott Desposato, Carol Mershon and Olga Shvetsova, and Norman Schofield. That switchers move in order to improve their ability to influence policy making is evident in the chapters by Kato and Yamamoto, Desposato, and Mershon and

Shvetsova—and is nicely consistent with Heller and Mershon’s substantive contribution in Chapter 7 (and with Heller and Mershon 2005). Gail McElroy and Kenneth Benoit show that party switching is motivated by politicians’ ideology and party policy as well as ambition, a finding that resonates with Heller and Mershon’s chapter. In the process, McElroy and Benoit point to the emergence of a new, pan-European party system that unites national and supranational parties in a single policy space, much like state and national parties in the United States. Timothy Nokken, looking at the United States, shows not only that US parties can and do influence legislators’ voting behavior, but also that legislators can manipulate voter perceptions of that behavior in order to both adhere to discipline in their new party and present themselves as consistent defenders of constant principles. Hence Nokken’s chapter demonstrates the importance of both achieving policy outcomes and pleasing voters—even when the two might seem incompatible. Marcus Kreuzer and Vello Pettai, finally, lay out the logic connecting switching and to the overall shape of the party system, arguing that context matters but, consistent with every other contribution to this volume, it matters in systematic ways.

Simply put, the take-away message is not only that party switching matters both because of how it influences and modifies politics and the political context and because of what it reveals about them. Switching affects the political context, and the political context affects switching. There is more: the causes of switching, how the consequences of switching play out, and how switchers behave all provide insight on political bargaining, party discipline, and the relative (and varying, cf. Mershon and Shvetsova this volume) importance of office, policy, and votes as motivations for legislators (Müller and Strøm 1999; Strøm 1990).

Taking switching seriously can open the door to new insights, both static and dynamic, about politics and political systems. For instance, if the relative sizes of legislative parties are a

defining element of party systems (as virtually all political scientists agree), and if switching alters party sizes, then individual-level party switching potentially can have a profound effect at the level of the party system. In this vein, the logic of our sketch of a switching game, together with the contributions to this volume, suggests that legislative party switching should be “lumpy,” as switchers respond to changes in information and also to switching-induced changes in the legislative environment. In the next section, we pursue briefly this implication as an example of just one of many lines of reasoning that flows from the logic of our general model of party switching.

2 Exploring Implications: The Question of Switching Cascades

Party leaders’ decisions can induce (or retard) switching independent of the decision makers’ intent. Switchers’ decisions can do the same. The individual decisions of party leaders and party switchers can affect parties’ legislative weights, attractiveness to voters, and policy preferences. To the extent that they do so, they have system-level consequences that can in turn trigger further, potentially system-altering decisions by other individual legislative actors. It is worth noting that our logic addresses not only changes in parties’ legislative weights (as do Laver and Benoit 2003), but also the formation of new parties (cf. Schofield and Mershon and Shvetsova this volume).

As a general rule, party switching affects both party seat shares and policy positions. In the process, and in conjunction with party leaders’ decisions on discipline, it affects the rewards switchers can reap (Heller and Mershon 2008).¹ This means (a) that legislators’ choices are interdependent (Aldrich and Bianco 1992); and (b) that at least some switches have pivotal or nearly pivotal effects on the legislative party system (Laver and Benoit 2003; Kato and Yamamoto this volume), thus raising the stakes for other potential switchers. Switching by one or a few legislators thus could lead to a cascade of switching, as later-switching legislators

respond to the changes in party weights induced by prior switches. (If legislators can share information, moves that would otherwise look like a trigger followed by a cascade might appear as multiple legislators moving all at once.) One reasonable hypothesis, then, is that switching should be lumpy—observed as en masse moves in reaction to new (or shared) information or as cascades triggered by a small number of key switches.²

Switches into a party increase its seat share, thereby making it marginally more attractive to other potential switchers. This attraction should increase as more switchers follow the first, enticing more and more legislators to switch. Such inswitching should continue until the marginal benefits that accrue to a switcher drop to a sufficiently low level (whether due to parties becoming less welcoming or to other adjustments in the costs and benefits of switching). For a party that loses members, the dynamic is reversed; the value of the party should decrease for its remaining members, in turn making further exits more likely. Countering this kind of decline is likely to be particularly difficult. We therefore would expect to see flight trends, to the extent that they occur, as particularly damaging to parties and possibly even eroding them to the point that they vanish entirely (particularly where legislative rules require a minimum number of members for a legislative party group).

When existing parties are weak (or when they disappear), they leave an attractive prize of potential voters for the party that can attract them. This should create an incentive to form new parties that are positioned to win that prize. For a single legislator to try to pick up those voters might be suicidal in career terms, but if an entrepreneur who sees the opportunity to pick up voters expects her own action to motivate others to switch as well—to set off a cascade, in other words—then a move that looks suicidal might in fact be a calculated risk. From this perspective, switchers need not be attracted only to existing parties; they also can be drawn to attractive but

under-occupied niches in the party spectrum (cf. Schofield this volume).

Switches have the capacity to redefine the legislative party system. When they do, at least some legislators who previously had not considered switching might come to reevaluate their options. To the degree that such reevaluation produces a few more switches, it is easy to envision conditions where those few initial switches could stimulate many more. The result should be cascades of switching, possibly but not necessarily settling into some kind of equilibrium.

3 Taking Party Switching Seriously: In Lieu of a Conclusion, a Beginning

Extant research on party switching, this volume included, has only begun to indicate the insights to be gained from studying the phenomenon. We cannot predict just how or how much taking party switching seriously can advance our understanding of political parties and legislative politics. We are convinced, however, that the study of party switching has the potential to reorient thinking about parties and party systems by concentrating analytical attention on the strategic, self-interested, ambition-driven decisions of individual politicians who, through their choices and changes of party affiliation, constitute parties and also drive the evolution of party systems. Indeed, the brief treatment of switching cascades just above illustrates that the analysis of switching offers new purchase on the dynamics of party systems.

The contributions to this volume build on a varied but largely inchoate literature on party switching. Ours is in essence a first cut at subjecting party switching to the sort of rigorous theoretical and empirical analysis that typifies studies of, for example, coalition formation. Taken together, our findings are interesting, even intriguing. And the findings form a coherent whole: We show how, why, and to what effect ambitious politicians change party affiliation in pursuit of their goals, as constrained by institutions and in response to their environments. The findings and this volume are not and cannot be definitive, however. As is so often the case in early exploration of a new area of research, the questions that remain—and new questions

emerge along with every new finding—far outpace the available answers. In a new field such as this, conclusions are a moving target. We have drawn our conclusions, and we have attempted to point the way to where other researchers might go as they consider how to examine party switching so as to gain new leverage on their own questions about legislative politics, parties, party systems, and democratic decision-making.

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Endnotes

¹ Seat shares would be unaffected by switching only if each exit from a party were offset by an entrance from another. As Mershon and Heller (this volume) show, switches affect party preferences in line with each switcher's marginal contribution both to the preferences of party she leaves and the party she enters.

² We see no reason to expect legislators' influence in their parties and in the legislature as a whole to be uniform. Moves by some legislators—notables—probably matter much more than moves by ordinary party rank and file.