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The Electoral Consequences of Party Switching by Incumbent Members of Congress, 1947–2000

What are the electoral consequences of switching parties for incumbent members of Congress? Do incumbents who switch fare better or worse after their switch? Aldrich (1995) and Aldrich and Bianco (1992) present a model of party affiliation for all candidates. We empirically extend this model for *incumbent* legislators who have switched parties. Specifically, we look at the universe of incumbent representatives who have run for Congress under more than one party label since World War II. We find that the primary and general election vote shares for party switchers are not as high after the switch as before. Additionally, we learn that party switching causes the primaries in the switcher's party and in the the opposing party (the switcher's "old" party) to become more competitive in the short run. Over the long run, however, primaries in the switcher's new party are less competitive than those in the old party before the switch.

When Jim Jeffords switched parties in May 2001, pundits and scholars wondered what this switch might mean for Congress and the balance of power in Washington. One overlooked aspect of Jeffords's switch was how it might play back home in Vermont. We will not know the electoral effects of Jeffords's defection until 2006, when he is up for reelection, but we can examine the electoral fates of other members of Congress who have changed sides.

What are the electoral consequences for incumbent members of Congress who switch political parties? The effect of partisan affiliation on legislative elections has long been of interest to scholars. By answering this question, we can learn more about the role of parties in congressional elections, while also deepening our understanding of the effects of party switching.

This paper analyzes the electoral consequences for incumbent legislators who have changed party labels. We look at the electoral results, before and after the switch, of only those legislators who have

made the decision to switch parties while in Congress.¹ We find that incumbent legislators who switch parties have poorer showings after their switch in both general and primary election contests; switching spurs more competitive primary races in the short run in their “old” party and, to a lesser extent, in their “new” party.

Our research fills an existing gap in the literature on party switching. Hager and Talbert (2000), McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2001), Nokken (2000), and Oppenheimer (2000) all find significant differences in switchers’ roll-call voting behavior in Congress before and after changing parties. Similarly, Glaser (2001) finds roll-call and legislative differences among southern legislators following their party defections. Also found in the literature are works pertaining to switching among party activists (Clark et al. 1991; Kweit 1986; Nesbit 1988; Prysby 1998; Stone 1991) and voter realignment. Other works, such as those by Castle and Fett (2000) and King and Benjamin (1986), analyze the causes of congressional party switching and find that district-level factors and ideology affect the likelihood of switching.

Critically missing from this literature are analyses of the *electoral* consequences of party switching, although Canon (1992) speculates about the electoral effects of party switching without empirically testing his conjectures. The only works that address the electoral connection to party switching are those of Aldrich (1995) and Aldrich and Bianco (1992), who develop a formal model of party affiliation.² This model demonstrates that candidates will switch parties if the electoral benefits of switching outweigh the electoral costs. But no one has empirically gauged the effects of party switching at the ballot box. We address this lacuna in the literature, drawing upon the Aldrich and Bianco model of legislative party affiliation.

The paper is organized as follows. First, we summarize the Aldrich and Bianco model of party affiliation. Second, we detail a partial empirical test of their model to determine if incumbents who defect incur electoral costs. Third, data are presented to test our hypotheses. Fourth, we examine the effects of party switching on general election and primary results. Finally, we discuss the implications of our empirical results for Aldrich and Bianco’s model.

The Aldrich and Bianco Model of Party Choice

Aldrich (1995, 52–57) and Aldrich and Bianco (1992) offer a formal model of the calculus of party choice: candidates choose the party that maximizes their expected chance of victory; the favored party will be the one expected to be most beneficial in terms of electoral prospects.

We hypothesize that there is an inherent cost to party switching for incumbent legislators who have previously been elected under a different party. Aldrich and Bianco generally acknowledge that costs exist, but they do not model these costs. We argue that there are costs unique to incumbent party switching that are not accounted for in their model.

What are the costs of party defection? Party switchers may alienate past supporters, including general election voters, primary supporters, and partisan elites, and be unable to fully compensate with the support of new partisans. As Canon (1992, 93) suggests, the costs of switching parties may outweigh the benefits if the legislator is already an incumbent with established connections within the constituency. When legislators alter their “presentation of self” by taking a new party label, they also alter the representational dynamics and levels of trust between themselves and constituents (Bianco 1994; Fenno 1978). This trust can be diminished further by changes in roll-call behavior after a switch (Nokken 2000).³ Former Democratic representative Glen Browder articulates these concerns: “Switchers have a difficulty. Democrats are mad at them for leaving, Republicans fault them because they’re a Johnny-come-lately. Their old friends hate them and their new friends don’t trust them” (Glaser 2001, 75).

Incumbents may see retaliation in poorer showings in subsequent elections or increases in competition in primaries. A recent case illustrates this point. During the 106th Congress, Michael Forbes (NY1) switched from the GOP to the Democratic party. He was originally elected in 1994, defeating an incumbent Democrat in a Republican-leaning Long Island district. Following a slow process of detachment from the Republican leadership over the next five years, which included demotions within the GOP conference, Forbes switched in July 1999. National Democrats welcomed his move; Dick Gephardt called local party officials with the news.

The reaction back home among both Democrats and Republicans was very different. “I really thought it was an April fool’s joke,” said Nora Bredes, a Democratic county legislator who ran against Forbes in 1996. “Forbes is a Democrat?”⁴ Other Democrats were angry and organized around another candidate, Regina Seltzer, a 71-year old retired librarian and near political neophyte. She ran against Forbes in the Democratic primary and claimed to be the “real” Democrat. Meanwhile, Republicans in the district launched an all-out assault on party-switching Forbes in an attempt to win the general election. These attacks from multiple fronts—within the new party and outside the old party—weakened Forbes’s electoral prospects. Forbes lost to Seltzer by less than one hundred votes in the Democratic primary.

Had he made it past the primary, he still would have faced an uphill battle in the general election.⁵ These sorts of electoral costs directly support our theory.

An Empirical Test

In order to measure the electoral effects of switching parties, we look at three different electoral variables: (1) the vote share received by party defectors, both pre- and post-switch, in general elections; (2) the vote margin between party defectors and their closest opponents, both pre- and post-switch, in primary elections; and (3) the level of primary election competitiveness in all elections before and after the switch in both parties' primaries.

We hypothesize that the nature of the electoral effects of party switching can be of three sorts:

H1 (Average effect hypothesis)—Incumbent party switching leads to electoral costs in all elections after the switch;

H2 (One-time effect hypothesis)—Incumbent party switching leads to electoral costs in only the election immediately following the switch;

H3 (Discounting effect hypothesis)—Incumbent party switching leads to electoral costs in elections following the switch, but this effect dissipates over time.

The first hypothesis looks at the average effect of switching on all post-switch elections because negative electoral consequences may be felt in every election after a switch. The second hypothesis isolates the election immediately following the party switch and looks at the effect for only that election. After all, 24% of all party switchers in our sample were defeated in either the primary or general election immediately following their switch. The third hypothesis examines the possibility that the electoral effect of switching parties is most profound in those elections that occur soon after the switch but that the effect dissipates over time. It is likely that Phil Gramm's House election one month following his defection to the Republican party will be affected more by the switch than will Democrat-turned-Republican Strom Thurmond's 1996 Senate reelection bid, since he switched over thirty years before.

Data and Methods

Table 1 lists our universe of incumbent representatives who have run for Congress under more than one party label since World War II.

TABLE 1
Congressional Party Switchers, 1947–2000

| Name | District/ State | Years Served | Date of Switch | Switch | Number of Elections |
|--------------------|--------------------|---------------------|-------------------|---------------------|------------------------|
| Atkinson, Eugene | PA4/PA25 | 1979–83 | 10/81 | D to R | 3 |
| Buckley, James | NY Senate | 1971–77 | 1/71 ^a | C to R | 2 |
| Byrd, Harry (Jr.) | VA Senate | 1965–83 | 3/70 | D to I | 3 |
| Campbell, Ben N. | CO Senate | 1993–present | 3/95 | D to R | 2 |
| Deal, Nathan | GA9 | 1993–present | 4/95 | D to R | 5 |
| Dellay, Vincent | NJ14 | 1957–59 | 85th Cong. | R to D to I | 1 |
| Emerson, Jo Ann | MO8 | 1996–present | 1/97 ^a | I to R | 3 |
| Forbes, Michael | NY1 | 1995–2000 | 7/99 | R to D | 4 |
| Goode, Virgil | VA5 | 1997–present | 1/00 | D to I | 3 |
| Gramm, Phil | TX6 | 1979–85 | 1/83 ^b | D to R | 4 |
| Grant, Bill | FL2 | 1987–91 | 2/89 | D to R | 3 |
| Ireland, Andy | FL8/FL10 | 1977–93 | 7/84 | D to R | 8 |
| Laughlin, Greg | TX14 | 1989–97 | 6/95 | D to R | 5 |
| Moakley, J. Joseph | MA9 | 1973–present | 1/73 ^a | I to D | 15 |
| Morse, Wayne | OR Senate | 1945–69 | 2/55 ^c | R to D ^c | 5 |
| Parker, Mike | MS4 | 1989–99 | 11/95 | D to R | 5 |
| Peysers, Peter | NY22/NY23 | 1971–77;79–83 | 4/77 | R to D | 6 |
| Reid, Ogden | NY24/NY26 | 1963–75 | 3/72 | R to D | 6 |
| Riegle, Donald | MI7 | 1967–77 | 2/73 | R to D | 5 |
| Shelby, Richard | AL Senate | 1987–present | 11/94 | D to R | 3 |
| Stump, Bob | AZ3 | 1977–present | 9/81 | D to R | 13 |
| Tauzin, Billy | LA3 | 1981–present | 8/95 | D to R | 11 |
| Thurmond, Strom | SC Senate | 1955–present | 9/64 | D to R | 9 |
| Watkins, Wes | OK3 | 1977–91; 97–present | 1/96 | D to R | 10 |
| Watson, Albert | SC2 | 1963–71 | 1/65 | D to R | 5 |

Note: Five other congressional party switchers were excluded. See text for details. The data in this table come from *The Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress; America Votes*, various editions; Castle and Fett (2000); Glaser (2001); McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2001); Nokken (2000); Oppenheimer (2000); and various newspaper accounts. Thanks to Gary King and Bruce Oppenheimer for assistance in finalizing this list.

^aEmerson and Moakley both ran as independents and then joined, respectively, the Republican and Democratic caucuses in the House as soon as the session began, without making formal announcements of party switch. Thus, their dates of switch are coded as January of the years they took office. Similarly, Buckley ran as the candidate of the Conservative party and joined the Republican caucus in January of 1971 without an official announcement of party change. Some previous studies (e.g., Oppenheimer 2000) have not included these cases in studies of the effect of party switching on legislative behavior. We do include them, however, as the theory suggests that changing party *label* (and not partisan attachment regardless of label) will have an impact on electoral outcomes.

^bGramm resigned from his House seat, which he was elected to as a Democrat, on this date. A special election was then held in which he ran as a Republican.

^cMorse actually switched from Republican to Independent, then from Independent to Democrat (Oppenheimer 2000). For electoral purposes, the switch was essentially from Republican to Democrat, however, as he did not stand for reelection as an Independent. The date given is for his switch to the Democratic party.

Our sample excludes a few members who switched parties while serving but, for a variety of reasons (e.g., retired, ran for higher office), did not later run for the same congressional seat as a member of the “new” party.⁶ We include the first election in which each eventual party switcher was elected to Congress and all subsequent elections to the same chamber in which each switcher ran.⁷ Therefore, our sample of elections is larger than the number of party switchers, allowing for reliable estimation.⁸ We do not look at why incumbent representatives switch parties, which would require a sample of both switchers and nonswitchers, but simply at the electoral effects of those incumbents who have switched parties. The decision to switch parties is not the dependent variable but an independent variable.⁹ The data sources for the dependent and independent variables detailed later in our paper are listed in the Appendix.

For each of the following analyses, we estimate models that control for heteroscedastic disturbances across groups and correlated disturbances within groups. This specification is important because we need to be cognizant of issues that may arise when analyzing panel data grouped by repeated observations of the same congressional district across time—the “group” in which the errors are likely to be correlated (Greene 1997; Huber 1967; Rogers 1993).¹⁰ We also include a lag of the dependent variable as an explanatory variable to control for autocorrelation. This method is an appropriate one, given the time-series, cross-sectional nature of our data (Beck and Katz 1995; Greene 1997).

Dependent Variables

To test our hypotheses specifically, we estimate four different sets of models pertaining to electoral competition. The dependent variable in the first set of models is the percentage of the two-party vote received in the general election. We use the two-party vote so that minor candidates do not obfuscate the analysis.¹¹ We only include results from elections to the chamber or office that was held at the time of the switch. For example, Phil Gramm’s Senate races are not included since his switch occurred while he was in the House; all of his House elections are included, however.

In the second set of models, the dependent variable is the primary vote margin, in percentage points, between the switcher and his or her closest opponent in each primary election. We look at the margin rather than the overall vote received because primaries can have a number of candidates. Thus, the margin of victory is a more directly comparable figure.

In our third and fourth sets of models, we estimate two different equations using primary competitiveness scores as our dependent variable. We compute these scores separately from primary results for both parties. Our method combines the number of candidates and their relative vote shares (Rae 1967; Rice 1985): $1 - \sum p_i^2$, where p_i is the proportion of the votes obtained by candidate i . The score is 0 when a primary is uncontested and approaches 1 as competitiveness increases.¹² We expect party switching to foster competition in both parties.

Party-Switching Variables

In order to test our three hypotheses, we operationalize our main independent variable in three different ways. By using three measures, we can address the nature of the consequences of party switching. The first measure (“switch1”) is a dummy variable scored as 1 for all post-switch elections and as 0 for pre-switch elections. The second measure (“switch2”) is a dummy variable scored as 1 for the election immediately following the switch and 0 for all others. The third operationalization of the switching variable (“switch3”) takes account of the amount of time between the switch and each subsequent election. Specifically, we first calculate the number of months between each post-switch election and the month when the legislator announced his or her switch. The resulting values range from one month (Gramm’s 1983 reelection) to 386 months (Thurmond’s 1996 reelection). We then invert this value to create the “switch3” variable, where all post-switch elections are scored as $1 / \text{number of months}$ and all pre-switch elections are coded as 0.

Although we think these variables should be included together in one model, we realize they are somewhat correlated. Thus, we estimate both a “full” equation with all three of these independent variables, as well as three additional equations with each party-switching variable included separately. By estimating separate equations for each party-switching independent variable, we also alleviate concerns that our full equation improperly nests models. We thus estimate four different equations for our four dependent variables, for a total of sixteen different equations.

We draw upon the well-developed literature on congressional elections and the incumbency advantage for our control variables. In our first set of models (general elections), district partisanship is certainly a predictor of the two-party vote, and we need to separate the effects of partisanship in the district from the actual effects of the switch. For this reason, we gauge the partisan balance of the district by using a

measure similar to Abramowitz's (1991). The variable is measured by deducting the presidential candidate's two-party vote share in the entire nation from his or her vote share in the district.¹³ We use results from the presidential election held concurrently with the congressional elections, or immediately before them in the case of off-year congressional races.¹⁴ This variable is coded using the presidential election results in the district for the legislator's "old" party. Following the legislator's party switch, the presidential election results for the candidate of the "new" party are used. We thus expect this variable to be positive and significant.¹⁵

We also include the previous congressional vote, as this variable has been shown to have an effect on legislative outcomes (Abramowitz 1991).¹⁶ We include a dummy variable for elections in which there is a quality opponent (Cox and Katz 1996; Jacobson 1989) running against the congressional switcher. The seniority of the switcher is another independent variable, measured as the number of years previously served in Congress (Abramowitz 1991).

We also include a dummy variable scored as 1 for elections where a switcher opposed an incumbent and 0 for all other elections, since switchers in the sample occasionally opposed incumbents. Similarly, open-seat elections make congressional races more competitive (Banks and Kiewiet 1989; Collie 1981), and thus we include a dummy variable scored as 1 for open-seat elections and as 0 for every other election contested by a switcher.¹⁷ Additional dummy variables are included, indicating when the switcher is unopposed and when elections take place in southern congressional districts (or states).¹⁸

Our sample includes mostly House elections but also includes some Senate races. Since the incumbency advantage is likely to be much lower in the upper chamber, a Senate dummy variable is included. Finally, we include an indicator variable for those switchers who ran as independent or third-party candidates.

In our set of primary election models, we control for seniority, open-seat primaries, southern Democratic primaries, previous general election vote, previous primary margin or competitiveness score, Senate elections, and independent candidacies all for similar reasons as described in the general election set of models. (See Herrnson and Gimpel 1995 and Rice 1985 for a more extensive discussion of the effect of these variables in primaries.) Additionally, a dummy variable for runoff primaries is included because Rice (1985) shows that there is a relationship between runoffs and increased levels of primary opposition. Similarly, a convention indicator variable denotes that a party does not hold primary elections. In these cases, the dependent variable

for competitiveness and primary margins will obviously be different from those involving elections. Finally, a dummy variable indicating whether or not the switcher was unopposed in the primary is included in the set of models looking at the primary vote margin, and district partisanship is included in both sets of primary competitiveness models because strong, one-party districts lead to increased primary competitiveness.

Results

Having specified the general election and primary election models, we now turn to the results. Does party switching affect candidates' general election fates? We find that party switching significantly decreases the general election vote received by those members who have switched, as shown in Table 2. In the full-equation column, only the coefficient for the first measure of party switching is negative and significant. On average, switchers lose about seven percentage points in all elections after they switch. The other two switching variables are not significant, although they are in the expected direction. Looking at the other three equations, we see that the coefficient for each switching variable is negative and statistically significant. In all four equations, most control variables are significant. We conclude that voters punish members who switch parties, and we surmise that a portion of previous supporters abandon incumbent switchers in general elections.¹⁹

These results confirm our overall expectations that the costs of switching parties may be greater than the benefits in general elections. We must, however, look at more than just the general election results to understand the Aldrich and Bianco model for incumbent members of Congress, since Aldrich and Bianco are careful to point out that their model does not simply predict that legislators will consider the effect of their switch on general elections only. In fact, Aldrich and Bianco state, "Incumbents may switch even though . . . switching lowers their chances in the general election" (1992, 104). Their argument is that incumbent legislators may switch parties not only to maximize their electoral fortunes in the general election, but also to enhance their chances in the primaries and to avoid primary challenges.

Table 3 displays results from the set of models with the switcher's margin with the closest opponent as the dependent variable. In the full-equation model, the coefficient for the third variable measuring party switching is negative and significant; the other two party-switching variables are negative but not significant. This is also the case for the other three equations, in which we estimate the party-switching variables

TABLE 2
The Effect of Party Switching on the General Election Vote^a

| Independent Variables | Full Equation (Equation 1) | Equation 2 | Equation 3 | Equation 4 |
|--|-------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| | β (s.e.) | β (s.e.) | β (s.e.) | β (s.e.) |
| Average effect of switch (switch1) ^b | -7.090 (2.85)** | -8.406 (2.55)*** | — | — |
| One-time effect of switch (switch2) ^c | -2.248 (2.62) | — | -6.103 (2.38)** | — |
| Discounting effect of switch (switch3) ^d | -0.415 (4.55) | — | — | -11.456 (4.56)** |
| District partisanship | 0.281 (0.07)*** | 0.284 (0.07)*** | 0.162 (0.06)** | 0.106 (0.05)* |
| Previous vote (lag) | 0.061 (0.04) | 0.059 (0.04) | 0.070 (0.04) | 0.076 (0.05) |
| Quality opponent | -6.357 (1.71)*** | -6.650 (1.63)*** | -7.032 (1.94)*** | -7.758 (1.87)*** |
| Seniority | 0.149 (0.16) | 0.209 (0.14) | -0.096 (0.09) | -0.045 (0.09) |
| Opposing incumbent | -8.042 (3.00)** | -7.596 (2.74)** | -6.392 (2.95)** | -4.336 (2.76) |
| Open seat | -4.099 (2.06)* | -3.887 (1.89)* | -3.509 (2.09) | -2.712 (1.79) |
| Unopposed | 31.041 (1.82)*** | 31.211 (1.85)*** | 30.949 (1.76)*** | 31.240 (1.98)*** |
| South | 1.051 (1.66) | 0.920 (1.65) | 1.320 (1.82) | 1.414 (1.82) |
| Senate election | -3.328 (1.53)** | -3.612 (1.43)** | -2.546 (1.56) | -3.437 (1.65)** |
| Independent/third party | 1.962 (3.61) | 2.208 (3.62) | 1.211 (2.66) | 1.605 (2.76) |
| Constant | 64.886 (3.69)*** | 64.900 (3.64)*** | 63.620 (3.38)*** | 62.212 (3.34)*** |
| N | 129 | 129 | 129 | 129 |
| F (13, 23) (11, 23) | 385.81*** | 273.33*** | 523.45*** | 812.46*** |
| R ² | 0.863 | 0.862 | 0.852 | 0.843 |

^aThese equations are estimated to control for groupwise (using the “cluster” command in Stata) and across-group heteroscedasticity and autocorrelation.

^bThis variable is coded as 1 for all post-switch elections and as 0 for all pre-switch elections.

^cThis variable is coded as 1 for the election immediately following the switch and as 0 for all other elections.

^dThis variable is coded as 1 / number of months between switch and election for all post-switch elections and 0 for all pre-switch elections. See text for more details.

***Significant at the 0.01 level; **significant at the 0.05 level; *significant at the 0.10 level.

TABLE 3
The Effect of Party Switching on the Switcher's Margin
With Closest Primary Opponent^a

| Independent Variables | Full Equation (Equation 1) | Equation 2 | Equation 3 | Equation 4 |
|--|-------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| | β (s.e.) | β (s.e.) | β (s.e.) | β (s.e.) |
| Average effect of switch (switch1) ^b | -2.639 (4.44) | -6.777 (4.84) | — | — |
| One-time effect of switch (switch2) ^c | -0.922 (4.57) | — | -6.307 (4.03) | — |
| Discounting effect of switch (switch3) ^d | -40.040 (9.05)*** | — | — | -44.889 (7.75)*** |
| Seniority | 0.381 (0.22) | 0.547 (0.22)** | 0.306 (0.18) | 0.322 (0.17)* |
| Open-seat primary | -23.647 (4.84)*** | -22.656 (4.75)*** | -23.058 (4.59)*** | -23.685 (4.82)*** |
| Runoff primary | 6.611 (4.20) | 4.529 (4.75) | 5.650 (4.80) | 6.691 (4.65) |
| Convention | 8.804 (3.89)** | 6.919 (4.02)* | 7.182 (4.11)* | 8.293 (4.03)* |
| Unopposed primary | 51.659 (6.05)*** | 53.231 (6.35)*** | 52.093 (6.25)*** | 51.216 (6.04)*** |
| Southern Democratic primary | -4.380 (5.72) | -3.009 (6.28) | -2.295 (5.86) | -3.022 (5.89) |
| Previous general election vote | 0.206 (0.07)*** | 0.170 (0.07)** | 0.172 (0.07)** | 0.205 (0.07)*** |
| Previous primary margin (lag) | -0.013 (0.04) | 0.170 (0.07)** | -0.004 (0.04) | -0.017 (0.04) |
| Senate election | -5.712 (4.52) | -5.098 (4.32) | -4.794 (4.70) | -6.115 (4.32) |
| Independent/third party | 11.479 (5.66)* | 10.191 (5.35)* | 11.020 (5.22)** | 11.874 (5.84)* |
| Constant | 31.188 (6.63)*** | 31.464 (6.81)*** | 31.669 (6.73)*** | 30.622 (6.86)*** |
| N | 134 | 134 | 134 | 134 |
| F (13, 23) (11, 23) | 358.56*** | 133.80*** | 123.80*** | 191.61*** |
| R ² | 0.810 | 0.802 | 0.801 | 0.809 |

^aThese equations are estimated to control for groupwise (using the "cluster" command in Stata) and across-group heteroscedasticity and autocorrelation.

^bThis variable is coded as 1 for all post-switch elections and as 0 for all pre-switch elections.

^cThis variable is coded as 1 for the election immediately following the switch and as 0 for all other elections.

^dThis variable is coded as 1 / number of months between switch and election for all post-switch elections and 0 for all pre-switch elections. See text for more details.

***Significant at the 0.01 level; **significant at the 0.05 level; *significant at the 0.10 level.

separately. The impact of the switch on post-switch primary election margins seems to diminish over time. The margin between the switcher and his or her closest opponent in a primary election held six months after the switch decreases by about seven percentage points, compared to all elections held before the switch. For a primary election held one year after the switch, the decrease is only about three percentage points. As expected, other control variables are significant predictors of vote margin. For instance, open-seat contests lead to smaller margins, a result consistent with previous studies. Also, incumbents whose previous general election vote shares are high can expect easier primaries. This result holds true even after we control for unopposed primaries, which, unsurprisingly, are also a significant predictor of primary vote margins. Clearly, switchers do worse in those primary elections soon after their defections.

Our third and fourth sets of models look at the effects of party switching on the level of primary competitiveness, both in the switcher's party and in the opposing party. Table 4 presents results regarding the level of competitiveness of the primary in which the switcher participates. In the switcher's party, there is more competition in the short run after a switch: "switch3" is positive and significant. In primary elections held five months or more after the switch, the switcher can expect a *decrease* in competitiveness; the variable measuring the average effect of switching ("switch1") is negative and significant.²⁰ Five other variables are statistically significant: open-seat primary, convention, previous general election vote share, Senate elections, and independent candidacies. All other things being equal, when a primary is held to fill an open seat, competitiveness in the switcher's party increases by 0.41. The results are similar, although not exactly the same, when we estimate the equations separately. The "switch3" variable, when estimated in its own equation (Equation 4), is still positive and statistically significant. The "switch1" variable, however, is not significant when estimated in its own equation (Equation 2), although it is negative.

Taken together with those in Table 3, these results suggest that very soon after a change in party affiliation, partisans in the switcher's new party may rally behind a serious primary opponent or opponents, thus narrowing the vote margin and increasing competitiveness. These effects wither away with time and switchers eventually consolidate enough support in their new party so that primary competitiveness decreases to lower levels than in their old party's primaries. Interestingly, a somewhat different story can be told with respect to our fourth model—competitiveness in the opposing party's primary.

TABLE 4
The Effects of Party Switching on Competitiveness
in Switcher's Primary^a

| Independent Variables | Full Equation | Equation 2 | Equation 3 | Equation 4 |
|--|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| | (Equation 1) | | | |
| | β (s.e.) | β (s.e.) | β (s.e.) | β (s.e.) |
| Average effect of switch (switch1) ^b | -0.116 (0.06)** | -0.056 (0.05) | — | — |
| One-time effect of switch (switch2) ^c | 0.021 (0.06) | — | 0.006 (0.04) | — |
| Discounting effect of switch (switch3) ^d | 0.490 (0.10)*** | — | — | 0.379 (0.11)*** |
| Seniority | -0.001 (0.00) | -0.003 (0.00) | -0.005 (0.00) | -0.004 (0.00) |
| Open-seat primary | 0.406 (0.05)*** | 0.401 (0.05)*** | 0.404 (0.05)*** | 0.408 (0.05)*** |
| Runoff primary | -0.047 (0.04) | -0.017 (0.05) | -0.016 (0.04) | -0.034 (0.04) |
| Convention | -0.241 (0.09)*** | -0.218 (0.08)*** | -0.227 (0.08)*** | -0.248 (0.08)*** |
| Southern Democratic primary | -0.030 (0.06) | -0.058 (0.05) | -0.036 (0.05) | -0.007 (0.07) |
| Previous general election vote | -0.002 (0.00)* | -0.001 (0.00) | -0.001 (0.00) | -0.002 (0.00) |
| Previous competitiveness (lag) | -0.050 (0.07) | -0.019 (0.07) | -0.015 (0.08) | -0.034 (0.08) |
| District partisanship | -0.001 (0.00) | -0.002 (0.00) | -0.003 (0.00) | -0.002 (0.00) |
| Senate election | 0.150 (0.06)** | 0.151 (0.06)** | 0.148 (0.06)** | 0.150 (0.05)*** |
| Independent/third party | -0.361 (0.09)*** | -0.352 (0.09)*** | -0.345 (0.09)*** | -0.350 (0.09)*** |
| Constant | 0.337 (0.06)*** | 0.294 (0.06)*** | 0.276 (0.06)*** | 0.297 (0.06)*** |
| N | 127 | 127 | 127 | 127 |
| F (13, 23) (11, 23) | 20.51*** | 15.04*** | 17.36*** | 17.56*** |
| R ² | 0.502 | 0.475 | 0.470 | 0.487 |

^aThese equations are estimated to control for groupwise and across-group heteroscedasticity and autocorrelation.

^bThis variable is coded as 1 for all post-switch elections and as 0 for all pre-switch elections.

^cThis variable is coded as 1 for the election immediately following the switch and as 0 for all other elections.

^dThis variable is coded as 1 / number of months between switch and election for all post-switch elections and 0 for all pre-switch elections. See text for more details.

***Significant at the 0.01 level; **significant at the 0.05 level; *significant at the 0.10 level.

TABLE 5
The Effects of Party Switching on Competitiveness
in Opposing Primary^a

| Independent Variables | Full Equation (Equation 1) | Equation 2 | Equation 3 | Equation 4 |
|--|-------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| | β (s.e.) | β (s.e.) | β (s.e.) | β (s.e.) |
| Average effect of switch (switch1) ^b | -0.063 (0.08) | 0.115 (0.10) | — | — |
| One-time effect of switch (switch2) ^c | 0.226 (0.09)** | — | 0.233 (0.08)*** | — |
| Discounting effect of switch (switch3) ^d | 0.404 (0.19)** | — | — | 0.674 (0.29)** |
| Seniority | 0.008 (0.00)*** | -0.001 (0.00) | 0.005 (0.00)** | 0.003 (0.00) |
| Open-seat primary | 0.288 (0.07)*** | 0.280 (0.07)*** | 0.285 (0.07)*** | 0.284 (0.07)*** |
| Runoff primary | 0.018 (0.06) | 0.083 (0.06) | 0.039 (0.06) | 0.045 (0.06) |
| Convention | -0.281 (0.09)*** | -0.255 (0.10)** | -0.274 (0.09)*** | -0.268 (0.09)*** |
| Southern Democratic primary | 0.020 (0.07) | -0.044 (0.07) | 0.011 (0.07) | -0.028 (0.07) |
| Previous general election vote | -0.001 (0.00) | -0.001 (0.00) | -0.001 (0.00) | -0.001 (0.00) |
| Previous competitiveness (lag) | 0.064 (0.10) | 0.067 (0.09) | 0.063 (0.09) | 0.068 (0.09) |
| District partisanship | -0.002 (0.00) | -0.004 (0.00) | -0.003 (0.00) | -0.002 (0.00) |
| Senate election | 0.037 (0.07) | 0.070 (0.07) | 0.035 (0.07) | 0.073 (0.06) |
| Independent/third party | 0.169 (0.15) | 0.164 (0.17) | 0.181 (0.16) | 0.145 (0.16) |
| Constant | 0.123 (0.10) | 0.098 (0.10) | 0.093 (0.10) | 0.149 (0.10) |
| N | 127 | 127 | 127 | 127 |
| F (13, 23) (11, 23) | 7.92*** | 5.29*** | 6.87*** | 5.08*** |
| R ² | 0.298 | 0.210 | 0.281 | 0.243 |

^aThese equations are estimated to control for groupwise and across-group heteroscedasticity and autocorrelation.

^bThis variable is coded as 1 for all post-switch elections and as 0 for all pre-switch elections.

^cThis variable is coded as 1 for the election immediately following the switch and as 0 for all other elections.

^dThis variable is coded as 1 / number of months between switch and election for all post-switch elections and 0 for all pre-switch elections. See text for more details.

***Significant at the 0.01 level; **significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 5 shows that switching affects the level of competitiveness in the primary of the opposing party.²¹ The significant coefficient for our second measure (“switch2”) shows that the primary for the switcher’s former party will be more competitive in the election immediately following the switch—an increase of 0.23 in the index in both Equations 1 and 3. This impact is quite striking and rivals that of an open-seat primary, a variable that we know is highly predictive of competitiveness. The coefficient for our third measure is also positive and significant, revealing that, in the event of a recent switch, this impact is even more pronounced. For example, in the full equation, the level of competitiveness in the first primary election held in the switcher’s “old” party 6 months after a switch would increase by almost 0.30. If the first primary election is held 36 months after the switch, then the increase is 0.24. If, however, the primary election held 36 months after the switch is *not* the first primary election (i.e., it is the second or subsequent primary), then the increase is only 0.01. It thus seems reasonable to assert that when an incumbent switches, viable challengers in the former party will throw their hats into the race, at least initially.

Discussion

When legislative party switching occurs, it has electoral consequences for incumbent members of Congress. We found that incumbents’ vote totals in both primary and general elections are affected by switching parties. In primary elections, a decrease in the switcher’s margin occurs soon after the switch and dissipates over time. In the general election, on the other hand, the switcher’s vote share tends to be lower in all elections, on average, following the switch.

We also found that, following a party switch, it is likely that primaries will be more competitive, especially in the election immediately following a switch in the switcher’s former party. There may be three processes at work here. First, revenge might be on the mind of the former party and, as a result, more individuals are likely to enter the race for the nomination. Second, it is likely that the former party’s operatives view their prospects for getting the district “back” as pretty high since their party was in power until the day when the defecting incumbent switched parties. If either of these scenarios is the case, then we can establish an inherent cost to switching parties. But, third, it is possible that this set of incumbents preemptively switched parties when they perceived that their switch would help them avoid a competitive primary in the long run. All the primary election findings indicate that switchers are hurt only when the switch occurs near the

subsequent election. These results support findings by King and Benjamin (1986) suggesting that congressional party switches are most likely to occur during non-election years.

We now have a greater understanding of the electoral effects of party switching. Future research needs to link these electoral findings with the literature on party switching and legislative roll-call behavior. Also, scholars need to consider the possibility that members of Congress may receive institutional benefits (such as more prestigious committee assignments) after switching parties since switching results in costs at the ballot box.

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APPENDIX

Data Sources for Variables

| <i>Dependent Variables</i> | <i>Sources of Data</i> |
|--|---|
| General election vote | <i>America Votes</i> |
| Primary vote margin | <i>CQ Guide to U.S. Elections</i> |
| Primary competitiveness (data used in measure number of candidates and primary vote received by each candidate) | Individual states' Boards of Elections |
| | |
| <i>Independent Variables</i> | <i>Sources of Data</i> |
| Names of party switchers Dates of party switches | <i>The Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress; America Votes; Castle and Fett (2000); Glaser (2001); McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2001); Nokken (2000); Oppenheimer (2000); and various newspaper accounts</i> |
| District partisanship | <i>Almanac of American Politics; America Votes</i> |
| Previous general election vote | <i>America Votes</i> |
| Previous primary margin Previous primary competitiveness Seniority Opposing incumbent | <i>CQ Guide to U.S. Elections</i> |

Open-seat general
 Open-seat primary
 Unopposed general
 Unopposed primary
 Runoff primary
 Convention in primary

Quality opponent

Various issues of *CQ Weekly*

South
 Southern Democratic primary

Alabama, Arkansas, Florida,
 Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi,
 North Carolina, South Carolina,
 Tennessee, Texas, Virginia

NOTES

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1. This research design follows previous research on legislative party switching (Nokken 2000; Oppenheimer 2000).

2. Hereafter, we refer to this model simply as the “Aldrich and Bianco model.”

3. As stated earlier, previous research on legislative party switching has focused on behavioral change by members. These changes, in concert with the change in party label, undoubtedly result in a change in the representative-constituency relationship. Furthermore, it is possible that members may actually change their behavior in order to build support with constituents from the new party. Glaser states “one might expect switchers to change their voting behavior to shore up support from new Republican constituents and to fend off primary challenges, particularly from the right” (2001, 75).

4. Nora Bredes, personal interview, October 2000.

5. Andrew Metz, “A Seltzer Surprise,” *Newsday*, 13 September 2000.

6. The following party-switching members of Congress are excluded from our analysis: Jimmy Hayes (LA), John Jarman (OK), Matthew Martinez (CA), Tommy Robinson (AR), and Bob Smith (NH). Hayes, Jarman, and Robinson did not switch parties until after their final congressional election. Hayes switched from the Democratic to Republican party in 1995 and unsuccessfully ran for the U.S. Senate in 1996. Jarman switched parties in 1975 and retired at the end of that term (1975–77). Robinson unsuccessfully ran for governor of Arkansas in 1990, following his switch from the Democratic to Republican party in 1989.

Martinez lost the 2000 Democratic primary in his district to Hilda Solis, a challenger who had been endorsed by many Democratic leaders. For the remainder of his lame-duck term, he caucused with Republicans in the House. Smith switched from the Republican party to independent in 1999, but then switched back to the Republican party before standing for reelection. Also, party switcher Vincent Dellay (NJ) is not included in this analysis because of insufficient data.

7. We combine both House and Senate switchers in our models because the Aldrich and Bianco formal model is, by definition, a universal theory pertaining to party affiliation. Thus, the underlying rationale of our theory is applicable to any incumbent legislator who switches parties. In any event, we estimated our models on House switchers only and results were virtually identical to those obtained using the pooled sample. Results are available upon request.

8. The set of general election models has a sample of 129 elections, and there are two different sample sizes for the sets of primary election models ($n = 134$; $n = 127$). The differential in the primary sample sizes occurs because of lack of data for one independent variable in the primary competitiveness models. The differential in sample size between the general election and the primary election models is due to data availability and the fact that some switchers lost in their primaries, thus precluding general election data.

9. To elucidate this point, we quote Gelman and King (1990, 1159): "In assessing the bias due to selection effects, one must be careful to distinguish selection due to explanatory variables, which causes no bias, and selection on the dependent variable, which does."

10. Alternatively, we considered estimating fixed effects or random effects models. Given the sample sizes, however, we decided the loss of degrees of freedom via these methods was impractical.

11. There are a couple of special cases that affect the coding of this variable. In four observations, the switcher was an independent candidate (Moakley's 1970 election, Emerson's 1996 election, and Byrd, Jr.'s 1970 and 1976 elections). In another case, the switcher was from the Conservative party (Buckley's 1970 election). In these cases, the two parties used to calculate the two-party vote were the party of these winning third-party candidates and the party of the candidate that placed second. Another exceptional case was Thurmond's 1954 election, in which Thurmond ran as a write-in Democrat against one other Democratic candidate. Here, we measured the dependent variable as the percentage of the vote that Thurmond received in this two-Democrat general election contest. In the case of Phil Gramm, who ran in an open special election following his party switch, we measured the dependent variable using Gramm's results and those of the second highest vote-getter, a Democratic opponent. Finally, given the uniqueness of the Louisiana open primary system, we chose to include the top two vote-getters in the primary as the general election candidates for the Billy Tauzin cases.

12. For our calculations, we only look at candidates who obtained at least 1% of the primary vote.

13. Abramowitz's (1991) measure is actually the difference in the two-party *margin* between the district and the entire nation. Another way to gauge partisanship would be to use presidential candidate vote share in the district, irrespective of the nationwide results. We estimated our models using such a measure as well, and our results were similar to those described in the text.

14. For the independent cases, we use the presidential vote of the party that the candidate is most ideologically identified with. For example, for Virgil Goode (VA5), the Republican presidential vote is used.

15. We are trying to distinguish the effect of party switching *above and beyond* what we would expect based on the strength of partisan attachment in the district.

Thus, for each election, we need to control for the presidential vote obtained by the candidate running under the same party label as the congressional candidate. It would not make sense, for example, to use Bill Clinton's vote in South Carolina in 1996 simply because Strom Thurmond used to be a Democrat more than 30 years ago. In 1996, the substantial size of Republican support in South Carolina is an important factor resulting in Thurmond's total vote and needs to be controlled for.

We tested our models using the "old" party's presidential candidate's vote share as a control. Coefficients for our switching variables did not change much, although the coefficient for the partisanship variable obviously became insignificant. For the general election model, the results were consistent with those presented in the text. In the case of primary election models, results were also consistent, with the minor exception of one variable in one model (switch1 in Table 4 is no longer significant).

16. For the observations of the switcher's first election, we use the previous vote of the candidate of the same party. For the coding of independents, we follow the same rule specified in endnote 14.

17. These two dummy variables can take the value of 1 in the switcher's first election (e.g., if running against an incumbent), when two incumbents are running against one another (e.g., after redistricting), and when a switcher comes out of retirement (e.g., Wes Watkins returned in 1996 to contest an open seat).

18. Campaign spending by congressional challengers also affects the vote received (Abramowitz 1991). Unfortunately, since many of the elections in this analysis were held before the campaign finance disclosure reforms of the 1970s, the data are simply not available and thus we cannot include this variable in the model.

19. Although we observe a decrease in post-switch vote shares, it might be argued that these switchers would have fared even worse had they not switched parties. This is very unlikely, however, since these legislators were not generally considered unsafe or vulnerable prior to switching. To confirm this assessment, we examined newspaper accounts and CQ vulnerability ratings of party-switching members from the 1980s to the present. (Such contextual accounts are difficult to find prior to 1980.) Most of these legislators were considered electorally safe prior to switching. Only following their switches were they portrayed as electorally vulnerable. To bolster this claim, we estimated our full model (excluding the "switch" variables) on pre-switch elections only and used these coefficients to forecast the predicted vote in every pre- and post-switch election. In the election immediately following the switch, we compared the forecasted vote (as if the legislator had not switched) to the actual value (that the legislator received after the switch). In all but one case, legislators would have received a greater general election vote percentage under the old party label.

20. We obtain the overall effect of the switch on competitiveness by dividing the coefficient for "switch3" (0.49) by the number of months (e.g., five months) and then subtracting the average effect (-0.116). Thus, the overall effect of a switch that occurred five months or more prior to an election will be negative.

21. For independent candidates, we code the opposing party as the one that they had previously been a member of or that they eventually joined. For example, Emerson's 1996 opposing party is the Republican party.

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