

"An Empirical Examination of the Impetus for Political Party Defection"

Jim F. Couch

Department of Economics and Finance
University of North Alabama
Florence, AL 35630, USA

Taylor P. Stevenson

Department of Economics and Finance
East Tennessee State University
Johnson City, TN 37614, USA

Abstract

It is relatively rare for members of the U.S. Congress to change their party affiliation with the contemporary two-party system being quite stable. Existing explanations of party switches include personal ideological concerns, constituency preferences and electoral concerns as well as coveted committee assignments. In this paper we will use a rational choice model which considers political payoffs from various sources and federal earmarks in addition to the current explanations. We use federal spending by state. We find significant increases in federal expenditures in the year following a change in party affiliation of the state's member of congress. We also examine the campaign finances of the contemporary party defectors.

Introduction

The 106th legislative session of the House of Representatives of the Tennessee State General Assembly was a quite lively one. The House had a majority of Republicans as did the state Senate. It was the first time since the Civil War that Republicans held a majority in both houses of the General Assembly. There were 50 Republicans in the 99 member House and the table was set for Representative Jason Mumpower to be the first Republican Speaker since 1969. After Mumpower's nomination, Gary Odom, a Democrat from Nashville, nominated Republican Kent Williams for Speaker. The roll call vote was 49-49 along party lines. The final vote fell to Williams who voted for himself along with the 49 Democrats to win the position in one of the more dramatic party defections. Williams was subsequently booted from the party and dubbed himself a "Carter County Republican." Williams maintained he was not dishonest because he had pledged to vote for a Republican Speaker, and he did!

In April of 2009 Senator Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania announced that he would be leaving the Republican Party after 28 years of serving as a Republican and that he would seek re-election in 2010 as a Democrat. The change was significant in that it provided the Democratic majority in the U.S. Senate with the 60 Senators needed to prevent Republican filibuster. Specter described his decision in the context of political ideology, "I now find my political philosophy more in line with Democrats than Republicans." He also cited electoral concerns stating that "Last year, more than 200,000 Republicans in Pennsylvania changed their registration to become Democrats." It is worth noting that Specter was expected to face stiff competition in the 2010 Republican primary from former Representative Pat Toomey.

One of the more notable recent party switches occurred in May 2001 when Senator Jim Jeffords of Vermont left the Republican Party and declared himself an Independent. His action effectively shifted the balance of power in the U.S. Senate to the Democratic Party. Jeffords subsequently became the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works in June 2001. After being elected to the House to represent Louisiana's 5th District as a Democrat in 2002, Rodney Alexander registered for re-election as a Democrat in 2004. Just before the filing deadline, Alexander registered as a Republican. Alexander won re-election and was subsequently assigned to the Appropriation Committee. The incumbents of the United States Congress who have changed their political party affiliation since World War II are shown in Table 1 for the Senate and Table 2 for the House of Representatives.

The question remains as to the full causes and consequences to a member of congress when they decide to change their party affiliation. We expect that a member of congress who defects to the majority party will be rewarded with, among other things, budget earmarks and campaign finance assistance. We will investigate the effects of party switching on the allocation of federal dollars across states and take a brief look at the campaign expenditures of the switchers.

Brief Literature Review

Electoral concerns of the party switchers are addressed by Aldrich and Bianco (1992) and Aldrich (1995). Their model predicts that the candidate will choose the party that gives them the highest probability of being elected. The authors argue that whether it is to avoid a competitive primary in the member of congress's former party or to

Table 1. House Party Switchers

Year	Old Party	New Party	Name
1949	Liberal	Democrat	ROOSEVELT
1957	Republican	Democrat	DELLAY
1959	Ind. Democrat	Democrat	ALFORD
1965	Democrat	Republican	WATSON
1971	Republican	Democrat	REID
1973	Democrat	Republican	JARMAN
1973	Ind. Democrat	Democrat	MOAKLEY
1973	Republican	Democrat	RIEGLE
1975	Republican	Democrat	PEYSER
1979	Democrat	Republican	ATKINSON
1981	Independent	Democrat	FOGLIETTA*
1981	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Republican</i>	<i>GRAMM</i>
1981	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Republican</i>	<i>STUMP</i>
1983	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Republican</i>	<i>IRELAND</i>
1987	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Republican</i>	<i>GRANT</i>
1987	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Republican</i>	<i>ROBINSON</i>
1989	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Republican</i>	<i>WATKINS</i>
1995	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Republican</i>	<i>DEAL</i>
1995	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Republican</i>	<i>HAYES</i>
1995	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Republican</i>	<i>LAUGHLIN</i>
1995	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Republican</i>	<i>PARKER</i>
1995	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Republican</i>	<i>TAUZIN</i>
1999	<i>Republican</i>	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>FORBES</i>
1999	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Independent</i>	<i>GOODE</i>
	<i>Independent</i>	<i>Republican</i>	<i>GOODE</i>
2000	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Republican</i>	<i>MARTINEZ</i>
2004	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Republican</i>	<i>HALL</i>
2004	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Republican</i>	<i>ALEXANDER</i>

Table 2. Senate Party Switchers

Year	Old Party	New Party	Name
1951	Republican	Independent	MORSE
1955	Independent	Democrat	MORSE
1963	Democrat	Republican	THURMOND
1969	Democrat	Independent	BYRD
1993	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Republican</i>	<i>SHELBY</i>
1995	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Republican</i>	<i>CAMPBELL</i>
2001	<i>Republican</i>	<i>Independent</i>	<i>JEFFORDS</i>
2008	<i>Republican</i>	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>SPECTER</i>

discourage challengers in the new party, the switch is part of a strategy to increase their probability of being re-elected. Empirical evidence reported by Yoshinaka and Grose (2003) shows that the vote shares decrease after the member of congress switches to the new party. Both party's primaries become more competitive after the switch and the primaries in the switcher's new party become less competitive over time.

Oppenheimer (2000), Nokken (2000) and Nokken and Poole (2001) find that members who switch parties change their roll call voting behavior. They claim that it is political ideology or political realignment that drives the change in party. Castle and Fett (2000) find that so-called cross-pressured politicians are more likely to switch parties.

Heller and Mershon (2002) use data from the Italian Parliament in which the incidence of party switching is more common than in the U.S. Congress. They find that the members of the Italian Parliament have a high probability of switching parties for ideological reasons if they can't be punished in the electoral process. Yoshinaka (2005) finds that senators who switched parties have a high probability of receiving committee assignments in violation of the seniority norm. The violations are more likely if the switch occurred after the 1994 midterm elections and if the senator's margin of victory was smaller. Committee assignments are certainly a lucrative incentive for the potential party switcher.

According to Canon (1992), Republicans actively recruited southern Democrats in the early 1990s. If such activity continued it could, at least partially, explain the relatively large number of party switches, five, in 1995.

Model and Data

We follow the logic of Yoshinaka (2005) who views the committee assignments in violation of seniority norms as payoffs to the members of congress that switch parties. The finding that members of congress receive favorable committee assignments after switching parties is evidence of their rational decision-making calculus. The logical extension is to question what other types of payoffs or benefits members receive from their decision to defect from their political party.

We considered political support through either in kind or financial campaign contributions from the political parties themselves or associated political action committees as obvious candidates for payoffs. Members of Congress value contributions to their campaign in order to gain re-election. Re-election is the first objective of the rational incumbent politician. However, the infrequent occurrence of party switching and the newness of the campaign contribution databases made empirical tests of the proposition impossible to conduct. We do, however, find anecdotal evidence in the campaign expenditures of the party switchers that may be indicative of incentives to party defectors. There is a great deal of variation in the percentage changes in campaign expenditures for the campaign that immediately follows the defection. The campaign expenditures of the party defectors and the percentage changes for the year of the defection and the year following the defection are shown in Table 3. We should note that over time there have been increases in campaign expenditures and those expenditures tend to vary with the popularity of the incumbent, the quality of the challenger and the margin of victory of the incumbents prior election.

Second, we believe there is a high probability that members of congress are compensated through federal government expenditures that benefit their constituency. Federal budget earmarks can help the incumbent member of congress gain re-election. The *Citizens Against Government Waste* gather information about so-called pork barrel spending, publish it and compile it into databases.

The problem again arises that the infrequency of party switching and the novelty of the earmark databases make difficult any empirical analysis directly using earmarks as a dependent variable.

It should follow, though, that increases in earmarks would be reflected as irregularities in federal government expenditures in the state. Given the limited instances of party defection in the House, we chose to use state level expenditures instead of district level expenditures so that the switchers in the Senate could be included in the sample.

Table 3. Campaign Expenditures and Percentage Change from Prior Year

Senators	Cycle prior to party defection	Cycle Nearest to party defection	Cycle following party defection
Ben Nighthorse Campbell	\$ 1,594,544	\$ 3,358,689 111%	\$ 2,047,824 -39%
James Jeffords	\$ 1,174,973	\$ 2,084,027 77%	<i>did not run</i>
Richard Shelby	\$ 2,816,778	\$ 5,705,869 103%	\$ 9,302,840 63%
Representatives			
Billy Tauzin	\$ 590,179	\$ 818,648 38.71%	\$ 936,707 14.42%
Michael Parker	\$ 449,819	\$ 384,108 -14.61%	\$ 115,827 -69.85%
Ralph Hall	\$ 630,746	\$ 1,178,472 86.84%	\$ 907,158 -23.02%
Rodney Alexander	\$ 821,896	\$ 1,355,844 64.97%	\$ 1,311,468 -3.27%
Virgil Goode	\$ 642,701	\$ 736,052 14.52%	\$ 996,385 21.74%

We use federal government expenditures by state as the dependent variable in our analysis. We use a standard government spending model which includes demographic variables that would explain spending on entitlement programs. We also include measures of tenure of the state's representation in the House as well as the Senate. We use a fixed effects model to find estimates of any changes in federal government expenditures for a state in the year following the party switch.

Results

The fixed effects model is appropriate for the data set which consists of federal government expenditures by state. We account for demographics which may influence the level of federal expenditures such as the population and per capita income, percentage of the population that is rural, over 65, in college, unemployed, the percentage of the population that voted and a measure of political party. We also include a weighted measure of the state's delegation to both the House and Senate. Our attempt at measuring the initial effect of the party switch was to include a dummy variable for the budget year immediately following the MC's defection. We find that there exists a significant spike in federal expenditures in the state immediately following the change in party affiliation.

Table 4. Fixed Effects Estimates for Federal Expenditures by state

Variable	Coefficient	StandardError	t stat	P value	Mean
<i>POP**</i>	9.59418284	0.26572952	36.105	0.0000	5060.878
<i>PCI**</i>	0.634010286	3.78E-02	16.777	0.0000	18407.872
<i>RURAL**</i>	-124.9846816	37.767108	-3.309	0.0009	32.2638
<i>COLLEGE*</i>	-693.5287116	389.70165	-1.78	0.0751	5.3082382
<i>OVER65</i>	-507.9206925	309.31502	-1.642	0.1006	12.2428
<i>PUBASST**</i>	564.7139842	136.88413	4.125	0.0000	5.4339861
<i>UNEMP</i>	-249.3420402	196.08612	-1.272	0.2035	2.5880853
<i>VOTER**</i>	60.20861745	15.958573	3.773	0.0002	46.986
<i>DEMO</i>	2.125198969	7.8274562	0.272	0.7860	49.940269
<i>TENH</i>	-335.4874855	446.50456	-0.751	0.4524	0.89144537
<i>TENS</i>	104.6646897	353.02879	0.296	0.7669	1
<i>SWITCH*</i>	2223.648243	1176.8903	1.889	0.0588	1.40E-02

We should note that the results are not robust to net federal expenditures, federal spending less federal taxes paid. Also, we have not included variables to account for party leadership and committees. There are likely gains that would persist over time if the MC were to be appointed to a committee such as the House Appropriations Committee. We have also ignored the issue of the size of the majority that is held by the switcher's new party which would greatly influence the payoffs to the switcher. The value of the defection would surely be related to the size of the majority.

In the instance of Jeffords becoming the deciding vote in the U.S. Senate or Williams becoming the deciding vote in the Tennessee legislature, we would expect the gains to be much larger relative to a politician who changes party affiliation in response to district level pressures.

Certainly, our results point toward identifying motives of switchers that extend beyond ideological differences. Public Choice Theory characterizes politicians as political support maximizers. They may be particularly interested in pork-barrel spending, campaign contributions or favorable committee assignments. It is probable that potential party defectors are presented with a bundle of benefits; a compensation package, which includes campaign contributions, committee assignments as well as pork barrel spending. All of which would help the incumbent member of congress with the main objective: keeping the job.

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