

Congressional Party Switchers and Committee Assignments: Who Gets ‘What, When, How?’*

Antoine Yoshinaka
University of Rochester
Department of Political Science

Please send comments to:
anty@troi.cc.rochester.edu

Paper prepared for delivery at the 2003 meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association,
Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, May 30-June 1.

Abstract: What are the consequences of party switching for members of Congress? While the roll-call consequences and the electoral consequences of congressional party switching have previously been studied, other consequences of party defections have yet to be systematically explored. In this paper, I examine the committee assignments of House party switchers and argue that party leaders seek to reward members of the opposing party who join their ranks. Using committee assignment data from the 94th House (1975-76) through the 107th House (2001-02), I show that party switchers were more likely than non-switchers to be the beneficiaries of violations of the seniority norm. Findings from this paper will be of interest to scholars of parties and Congress, and fill a gap in the literature on party switching.

* I would like to thank Catherine Rudder, Bob Erikson, Curt Signorino, and Russell Renka for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of the paper.

“When you joined the Republican Conference on August 6, 1995, the elected leadership... determined that your accumulated seniority in the Congress would be credited when you joined the Republican Conference... Therefore, the Republican Steering Committee’s Seniority List ranks you 19th in overall conference seniority and designates May 22, 1980 as the beginning of your tenure in the House for purposes of Republican seniority.”

April 4, 2000 letter from Speaker Dennis Hastert to party-switcher Billy Tauzin.¹

“Harry Reid offered him his committee (chairmanship), the environment committee.”
Senator Christopher Dodd on the committee assignment of party-switcher Jim Jeffords.²

When legislators decide to cross the aisle and switch partisan affiliation, they implicitly make a gamble with their career. Getting initially elected to Congress is not an easy task. Once elected, members of Congress (MCs) are able to enjoy the fruits of incumbency and are very likely to get reelected; they are not necessarily keen on disturbing the conditions under which they first were elected. Consequently most MCs remain affiliated with the same party throughout their career. However, in some rare instances, MCs have switched sides. The consequences of such a decision are far-reaching for politics, both in Washington and in the district.

While electoral and roll-call consequences of congressional party switching have previously been studied (Glaser 2001; Grose and Yoshinaka 2003; Hager and Talbert 2000; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2001; Nokken 2000; Nokken and Poole 2001; Oppenheimer 2000), other consequences of party defections have yet to be systematically explored. In this paper, I look at the effect of party switching on committee assignments in the House of

¹ John Bresnahan and Stacey Zolt, “Hastert Enters Commerce Fray: Tauzin, Oxley Battle Over GOP Seniority,” *Roll Call*, April 10, 2000.

² Edward Walsh and Helen Dewar, “Daschle, Reid Aided In Decision; Democratic Leaders Courted Jeffords,” *Washington Post*, May 25, 2001, A1.

Representatives, and argue that party leaders seek to reward party switchers by offering them favorable committee assignments.

As the above quotes illustrate, members of Congress who switch parties are often in a strong position to obtain institutional benefits from their new party. Billy Tauzin's committee assignments following his switch in 1995 were controversial in that they were in direct conflict with those of more senior Republican members. By allowing Tauzin to keep his years of seniority accrued as a Democrat, GOP leaders effectively promoted Tauzin within the Republican Conference and on his assigned committees. Previous studies have offered descriptive accounts of the ways in which party leaders have tried to accommodate party switchers using the committee assignment process (Hager and Talbert 2000; Renka and Ponder 2002). In this paper, I offer a systematical test of the hypothesis that party switchers are more likely than non-switchers to "jump the queue" of a congressional committee.

Findings from this paper will be of interest to students of parties and Congress, and will lend support to the claim that parties can use their institutional prerogatives to reward or punish their members (e.g., Cox and McCubbins 1993). The party cartel literature has argued that party leaders use selective incentives to induce MCs to further the party's interests. A seemingly logical extension of that theory would predict that party leaders use similar tactics to reward party switchers for joining their ranks.

Theoretical Background

The decision to switch parties is generally a strategic decision taken by forward-looking legislators. While the circumstances surrounding a switch might be specific to each case, MCs are undoubtedly cognizant of the potential effects of switching parties, which are far from trivial. In the district, MCs have to rebuild a reelection constituency, which surely comprises core

supporters who remain unperturbed by the switch. However, party switchers also need to court at least some new voters who previously would support their opponent. This is especially true for switchers who need to fend off primary challenges within their new party. This has been shown to hurt party switchers at the ballot box (Grose and Yoshinaka 2003). For instance, when Michael Forbes became a Democrat in 1999, it forced him to appeal to liberal voters in his Long Island district who were not too fond of his pro-life, pro-gun voting record as a Republican. As a result, Forbes was defeated in the 2000 Democratic primary by Regina Seltzer, a 71-year old retired librarian.

Another likely consequence to be considered by party switchers pertains to the reaction of campaign contributors. While there are no cross-sectional studies rigorously assessing the impact of party switching on campaign contributions, there exist some descriptive accounts in the literature on PAC behavior. In a case study of Nathan Deal and Billy Tauzin (two Democrats who switched to the GOP following the 1994 election), Johnson and Van Houweling (1999) found that liberal PACs were less likely to contribute to their campaigns following their switch, while business PACs were more likely to fund these new Republicans. These consequences—the need to court new voters and contributors—represent opportunity costs for MCs who decide to change partisan stripes. While they can be overcome, these potential costs have to be considered by MCs who are thinking of switching parties.

Party switching also brings about changes for politics in D.C. For instance, MCs who changed party affiliation have been shown to change their voting record in Congress (Hager and Talbert 2000; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2001; Nokken 2000; Nokken and Poole 2001). While the dynamics underlying this change of legislative behavior are still unclear, the fact remains that switching parties entails switching revealed preferences. These changes—both in

Washington and in the district—can perturb the stable equilibrium cherished by MCs.³ In a way, this is analogous to redistricting, which forces MCs to modify their behavior and increases uncertainty (e.g., Bullock 1975; Fenno 1978; 2000). Of course, unlike redistricting, party switching is an endogenous shock to a member’s career since MCs are making the decision to switch parties.

While the decision to switch parties ultimately lies with each individual MC, party leaders play a nontrivial role. Aware of the costs inherent to the decision to change party affiliation, party leaders may offer benefits in the form of “good” committee assignments as rewards for switching parties. In doing so, they can send a strong signal to potential switchers that similar benefits await them.

A central underlying assumption is that party leaders seek out potential switchers. There are theoretical reasons to believe that political parties have incentives, both institutional and electoral, to attract members of the opposing party. On the institutional front, the minority party will seek to attain the status of majority party and, in rare instances, a single switch can achieve this goal (e.g., Senator Jim Jeffords’ defection from the Republican party in 2001). At the very least, a switch will bring the minority party one seat closer to becoming the majority. For the majority party, attracting party switchers increases the size of its majority. While this may seem to run contrary to the expectation that politicians prefer minimal-winning coalitions (Riker 1962), there nonetheless exist ways for the majority party to increase the size of the legislative “pie,” for instance by adding seats on a committee. In addition, members of a party enjoying a razor-thin majority might feel more at ease if they can increase that majority by bringing in one or more members of the opposing party. This is especially relevant when the majority is

³ It cannot be overstated that MCs value stability. For instance, MCs usually have a consistent legislative voting record throughout their career (Poole 2003; Poole and Rosenthal 1997; though for divergent findings, see Stratmann

comprised of members who are ideologically inclined to vote with the opposition, or even more relevant when some members of the majority party are threatening to switch to the minority party.

On the electoral front, by attracting party defectors, a party can send a positive signal to voters and contributors about the party's electoral fortunes (Glaser 1996, 190). Further, incoming party switchers bring with them an array of activists, campaign workers, and local supporters (Canon 1992, 90). This infusion of new blood in the party is extremely attractive for local party elites who are constantly trying to expand their support. Thus, a switch might increase the electoral prospects of the switcher's "new" party both at the national and local levels.

There is some evidence that party leaders and party organizations try to lower the costs for switchers by offering them "rewards" for switching parties (Canon 1992; Frantzich 1989; Hager and Talbert 2000; King and Benjamin 1986). This paper simply extends this line of thought and argues that one such reward is bestowed upon congressional party switchers through the committee assignment process.

The Committee Assignment Process

The literature on congressional committees is extremely rich.⁴ While scholars disagree about the rationale for committees, the impact of committee assignments on electoral fortunes, the relative desirability of committees, or the existence of a "seniority" norm, one point remains uncontested: committee assignments are highly valued by MCs (e.g., Clapp 1964; Cox and McCubbins 1993; Hibbing 1991). All else being equal, most MCs prefer being assigned to a

2000), and they tend to stay on committees assigned to them early on (Bullock 1973; Bullock and Sprague 1969).

⁴ A non-exhaustive list of works includes Bullock 1970; 1972; 1973; Bullock and Sprague 1969; Deering and Smith 1997; Fenno 1966; 1973; Goodwin 1959; 1970; Groseclose and Stewart 1998; Huitt 1957; Kieweit and McCubbins

desirable committee (e.g., Appropriations) than to a committee of lesser value (e.g., House Administration), and MCs prefer to rank higher on any given committee. Given that committee assignments are a scarce resource, and that MCs care about their committee assignments and about their ranking on those committees, party leaders are in a position to use the committee assignment process as a tool to reward/punish certain types of behavior.

The simplest way for party leaders to reward MCs is to assign them to “good” committees. Ranking committees from most to least desirable is not a trivial task. Fortunately, scholars have devised methods to rank committees based on transfer data (Bullock 1973; Bullock and Sprague 1969; Endersby and McCurdy 1996; Goodwin 1959; Groseclose and Stewart 1998; Munger 1988; Stewart 1992; Stewart and Groseclose 1999), the exclusiveness of committees (Gawthrop 1966), member requests (Rohde and Shepsle 1973), or composite measures (Jewell and Chi-Hung 1974; Ray 1982). Regardless of the methodology employed, scholars and practitioners agree that some committees are more desirable than others and that each MC has a transitive preference ordering of committees.

Another way in which party leaders use the committee assignment process to reward MCs is to violate the “seniority norm.” The textbook interpretation of each MC’s ranking on a committee states that a committee can be viewed as a “queue” where members of each party are ranked according to their length of tenure on the committee (e.g., Shepsle 1978). Members assigned to a committee for the first time begin their tenure at the back of the committee “queue.” As members leave a committee or Congress altogether, those below the departed member move up that committee ladder. While rankings on committees generally follow this model, the debate over the existence of a seniority norm is still open (e.g., Huitt 1957; Cox and

1991; Krehbiel 1998; Manley 1970; Maltzman 1997; Masters 1961; Polsby, Gallaher, and Rundquist 1969; Rohde and Shepsle 1973; Shepsle 1978; Stewart and Groseclose 1999.

McCubbins 1993; Deering and Smith 1997). In more recent years, party leaders, especially GOP leaders, have on several occasions asserted their authority by violating this “norm,” and the party caucus has ratified these “violations.”⁵ While this paper does not address the question of whether such a norm exists, it is fair to say that 1) decisions to move a member up or down a committee queue are prompted by party leaders (see Renka and Ponder 2002), and 2) such violations are rare. Also, the legislative party cartel model asserts that these types of violations are manifestations of the strength of congressional parties.⁶

In this paper I examine whether party switchers are more likely than other members to be the beneficiaries of these types of violations of the seniority norm. Before turning to the quantitative test, I look at two MCs who have switched parties in the 1990s: Mike Parker and Greg Laughlin. Doing so will illuminate the dynamics of the committee assignment process as it applies to party switchers.

Mike Parker was elected to the 101st House as a Democrat from Mississippi’s fourth district. Upon his arrival to Congress, he was assigned to the Committee on Public Works and Transportation and the Committee on Veterans’ Affairs. Those committees were ranked 17th and 19th respectively (out of 22 committees) according to the Groseclose-Stewart method of committee values (Groseclose and Stewart 1998, 470). In the following House, he kept his assignment on Public Works and Transportation but transferred from Veterans’ Affairs to the Budget Committee (ranked 6th out of 22 committees). His assignments remained unchanged until he switched parties in November 1995 (104th House). In March 1996, the GOP leadership awarded Parker a seat on the prestigious Appropriations Committee, where he was “tenured in”

⁵ Uncompensated violations occur when, for instance, a member is removed from a committee and is not compensated by a seat of equal or greater “value.” Another type of violation occurs when junior members on a committee are given precedence over more senior members when assigning ranking on the committee.

as having served on that committee since the *beginning* of the 104th House, thus jumping ahead of members who had been sitting on Appropriations since January 1995. Then in the following House, Parker kept his seat on Appropriations and was re-assigned to the Budget Committee and the Committee on Education and the Workforce.

Greg Laughlin was also elected as a Democrat to the 101st House by voters of Texas' 14th district. He was initially assigned to the Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries and the Committee on Public Works and Transportation (ranked 12th and 17th respectively by Groseclose and Stewart 1998). In the 103rd House, he received a third assignment, to the Committee on Post Office and Civil Service (ranked 13th out of 22 committees). He switched to the GOP in June 1995 and in order to accommodate him, the GOP leadership added one Republican seat to the coveted Ways and Means Committee (ranked as the most prestigious committee by Groseclose and Stewart 1998). He was also tenured in ahead of Republican members who had been assigned to Ways and Means at the start of the 104th House.

What is evident from these two cases is that party leaders have the ability to go out of their way to assign party switchers to desirable committees and can also make them jump the committee queue ahead of more senior members. As Republican Conference Chairman John Boehner stated when discussing another party switcher's (Billy Tauzin) committee assignment: "We want to treat (party switchers) well."⁷

An Empirical Test

Dependent variable. In order to assess the impact of party switching on committee assignments, I examine the occurrence of violations of the seniority norm in the U.S House of Representatives from the 94th House through the 107th House. Unless specified otherwise, the

⁶ The important point here is that the involvement of party leaders is a *necessary* condition for "rewards" to be provided.

data for the dependent variable come from Renka and Ponder (2002). Specifically, I look at instances when a member *benefited* from such a violation (henceforth referred to as “rewards”). For example, at the start of the 104th House, Speaker-elect Gingrich handpicked some of his close allies and nominated them to be committee chairs, often bypassing more senior members on those committees. Each of these violations counts as a “reward.” I also count as rewards those cases when members assigned to a committee in the middle of a legislative session are tenured in *as if* they had been assigned to that committee at the beginning of the session (recall Parker and Laughlin’s examples of being tenured in as if they had served on their committees since the beginning of the 104th House).⁸ In the case of party switchers, they can also benefit from another type of violation, by being “tenured in” and keeping their seniority accumulated under the old party label. For example, when Billy Tauzin switched parties in the 104th Congress, he was allowed to keep his 14 years of seniority accumulated as a Democrat on the Commerce Committee, thus jumping in front of many Republicans. Every such case counts as one “reward.”

The dependent variable in the analysis is thus a dummy variable that takes the value of 1 when a member was rewarded with a violation of the seniority norm, and 0 when the seniority norm was respected.

A few methodological notes are in order. First, when a chair was deposed, I count as a reward only those cases where the new chair was not next-in-line in the committee queue. So for example in the 94th Congress, Wayne Hayes, chairman of the Committee on House Administration, was involved in a scandal and was asked by Majority Leader Tip O’Neill to resign his chairmanship. In replacement, Frank Thompson, the most senior Democrat on the

⁷ Gabriel Kahn, “Party Switchers Tangle Up Committee Seniority Issue,” *Roll Call*, December 21, 1995.

committee, was named chair. I do not count this as a reward, because the violation was aimed at punishing the outgoing chair and his replacement followed the seniority norm. However, I do count as a reward those cases where the incumbent chair was replaced by a member who was not the most senior member on the committee (e.g., 7th ranked Les Aspin became chair of the Armed Services Committee for the 99th House). The point here is that, on top of the “punishment” to the outgoing chair, there has to be a “reward” to a less-senior member.

Second, the unit of analysis is each member for each House. The entire universe of cases is thus 6,614 members/Houses. This is theoretically relevant since I am interested in examining whether a member was rewarded with a violation of the seniority norm in any given House, not in the number of such violations. Another possibility would have been to use each committee assignment as the unit of analysis, and then testing the likelihood that an assignment is made in violation of the seniority norm (e.g., Billy Tauzin’s assignments to the Committee on Commerce and the Committee on Resources in the 104th House would be two cases). However, doing so while assuming the independence of each assignment is problematic, since committee assignments for each individual MC are likely to be related.

Third, the occurrence of a violation of the seniority norm is a rare event (both theoretically and empirically). In order to provide unbiased estimates of all the parameters, I use rare-events logit regression analysis (see King and Zeng 2001; 2002; Tomz, King, and Zeng 2003).⁹ Doing so will also provide correct estimated probabilities that would otherwise be biased downwards. This estimation method has been developed specifically to analyze data where the data-generating process underlying the dependent variable is theorized as a rare event. It entails two procedures. First, I sample all cases where the event occurred (33 cases of

⁸ Typically around 95 percent of all committee assignments are made at the beginning of a new Congress, which means that five percent of all assignments are made after the start of a new Congress.

rewards) and a fraction of nonevents (108 cases of non-rewards). The sample of nonevents is randomly selected from the universe of nonevents (6,131 cases). Second, I apply a prior correction mechanism described in King and Zeng (2001, 144). As a result, I obtain unbiased and consistent estimates of the coefficients, as well as correct estimates of the probability that an MC will be rewarded with a violation of the seniority norm. It must be noted that included in the sample of 108 nonevents are all eight cases where a party switcher was not rewarded. I included those cases in order to have more leverage in the statistical analysis. Such nonrandom sampling on the independent variable, of course, does not bias our inferences. And by including these cases that run counter to my hypothesis, I make it more difficult to reject the null hypothesis that switching does not have any effect on committee assignments.

Fourth, my analysis covers all Houses from the 94th House through the 107th. I decided to start with the 94th House because of the reforms to the committee system enacted at the time (see Rohde 1991). These reforms moved power away from committee chairs and gave the party leadership (through the Steering and Policy Committee for the Democrats) more discretion in committee assignments.

Independent variables. The main independent variable is a dichotomous variable that takes the value of 1 for a House member who switched parties in that Congress.¹⁰ Table 1 lists members who switched parties in the House during the period under study. Two members (Peyser and Watkins) actually switched *between* two nonconsecutive terms. In those cases, the variable takes the value of 1 in the House in which they were elected under their new party label (i.e., 96th for Peyser and 105th for Watkins). Also, Andy Ireland was coded 1 for both the 98th

⁹ I estimated this model using the “Relogit” command in Stata (Tomz, King, and Zeng 1999).

¹⁰ Sources: Grose and Yoshinaka 2003; Oppenheimer 2000.

and the 99th Houses. I did so because while he switched to the GOP during the 98th House, he was “rewarded” during the 99th House.¹¹

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

I control for relevant factors that might affect the likelihood of being rewarded with a violation of the seniority norm. *Terms* is a variable that equals the number of terms served in the House.¹² In general, I expect that senior members are more likely to be rewarded. *Genvote* is a variable that equals the two-party vote share (in percentages) of the member in the preceding election.¹³ All else equal, I expect safe members to be less likely to be rewarded, since parties stand to gain more by rewarding MCs from marginal districts. The argument that committee assignments are related to electoral factors has been made before (Clapp 1964; Crain and Sullivan 1997; Masters 1961; Rohde and Shepsle 1973), though it has not held up very well to empirical analysis (Bullock 1972; 1973; Fowler, Douglass, and Clark 1980).

Post1994 is a dummy variable that takes the value of 1 for the 104th, 105th, 106th, and 107th Houses. With the advent of a GOP majority in 1994 and the subsequent changes in the committee assignment process (e.g., term limits for committee chairs), we should expect rewards to be more likely to occur during that period (see Deering and Wahlbeck 2002; Renka and Ponder 2002).

Majority is a dummy variable that takes the value of 1 when a member is in the majority (i.e., Democrats before the 104th House, Republicans thereafter). Again, I expect that variable to be positively correlated with rewards, since the majority party can exert more influence and the

¹¹ Ireland’s “reward” in the 99th House was directly related to his decision to join the ranks of the Republican party. But I also include the instance of non-reward in the 98th House, partially to avoid the criticism that I am “stacking” the deck in my favor by excluding such a case that runs contrary to my expectations.

¹² Sources: Cox and McCubbins dataset from <http://mmccubbins.ucsd.edu/polisciexperlab/MCCUBBIN/DATA>; Stewart and Woon dataset from http://web.mit.edu/17.251/www/data_page.html.

¹³ Source: *America Votes*.

stakes are higher for majority-party committee assignments. In their descriptive study, Renka and Ponder (2002) noted that most violations are committed by the majority party.

I also include a variable measuring ideological distance from the party. *Ideodist* measures the standardized distance in the 1st dimension of the Poole-Rosenthal DW-NOMINATE scores between the member and the average member of the party in the preceding Congress.¹⁴ The variable is thus an ideological distance, in units of standard deviations, from the party mean (see Cox and McCubbins 1993).¹⁵ I examine ideological distance in the preceding Congress because committee assignments are usually made at the beginning of a Congress.¹⁶

Finally, *Nbcomm* is a variable that equals the number of committee assignments for a member during that House.¹⁷ All else equal, a member receiving more committee assignments has a higher probability that the member will benefit from at least one violation of the seniority norm.

Results

Preliminary evidence of a party switching effect is clear from Table 2. From a bivariate perspective, party switchers appear more likely than non-switchers to be rewarded with a committee assignment in violation of the seniority norm.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

While 58 percent of switchers (11 of 19) were rewarded, the proportion of non-switchers *in the sample* rewarded was 18 percent. It is important to note that if one examined all non-switchers

¹⁴ Source: Poole and Rosenthal dataset from http://voteview.uh.edu/default_nomdata.htm.

¹⁵ I also created a variable measuring ideological distance to the party *median*. Results from the analysis substituting this variable for the one used in the paper are substantially the same and are not reported (available on request).

¹⁶ In the case of freshmen, I include their ideological distance during their first term. Excluding freshmen altogether was another possibility, and doing so does not change results of the analysis (available on request). However, I decided to keep them in the analysis because freshmen could theoretically switch parties during their first term (e.g., Ben Nighthorse Campbell switched parties during his first term in the Senate) and a freshman *could* benefit from a violation of the seniority norm (e.g., Campbell also maintained his seniority after he switched).

¹⁷ Sources: Cox and McCubbins dataset; Stewart and Woon dataset.

in the population (every member for each House), the proportion of rewards would be much lower (less than half a percentage point). Thus, there is strong preliminary evidence that switchers are likely to be rewarded with a violation of the seniority norm.

Turning to the multivariate test, Table 3 shows the results of the rare-events logistic regression. The coefficient of the main variable of interest—party switching—is positive and statistically significant. All things equal, members who switched parties were more likely than non-switchers to be rewarded with a violation of the seniority norm. While expected, this strong positive result lends credence to the theory that parties try to provide benefits to party switchers in the form of rewards in the committee assignments process.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Also as expected, the coefficients for seniority, post-1994, and electoral margin are all statistically significant. Everything else being equal, senior members are more likely than junior members to be rewarded with a violation of the seniority norm. Such violations were also more likely to occur after the 1994 midterm elections. Finally, members from marginal districts were more likely than safe members to be rewarded.

While the coefficient for majority party is positive, it is not statistically distinguishable from zero. Ideological distance is negatively related to rewards (i.e., MCs closer to the party mean are more likely to be rewarded), but also fails to achieve statistical significance. Finally, the number of assignments bears no relation to the likelihood of being rewarded. This last result might come as a surprise, since probabilistically, receiving more assignments increases the likelihood that at least one of them will be a violation. However, these two actions—the assignment of committees and violation of the norm—are unlikely to be independent of one another. Indeed, it might be perceived that a queue-jumping “reward” is worth enough that most

MCs are content with obtaining only one assignment. This might cancel out the hypothesized positive effect.

Next, I constructed a table of the predicted probabilities of being rewarded with a violation of the seniority norm. Table 4 shows that the probability of being rewarded increases dramatically for switchers. I hold all variables at their median or mean, except for *post1994* and *switchers*.¹⁸

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

As can be seen from Table 4, switchers are about 25 times more likely than non-switchers to be rewarded with a violation of the seniority norm. Also, such a violation was more than four times more likely to occur in the post-1994, GOP-dominated era. At first glance, the probabilities of being rewarded are extremely low. However, one must keep in mind that these probabilities are computed using a prior correction method that takes account of the fact that the vast majority of committee assignments were made without any violation of the seniority norm. This is reflected in the low value of the constant (nearly -5), which in turn decreases the baseline probability that $Y=1$. Yet the fact remains that switchers are much more likely than non-switchers to be rewarded with a violation of the seniority norm.

Conclusion

The decision to switch parties is a highly risky one. MCs value stability, and changing party affiliation in the middle of a congressional career can have profound effects for the member, some of which have been discussed elsewhere. Specifically, findings pertaining to the roll-call consequences and the electoral effects of party switching demonstrate that the act of

¹⁸ I hold *terms* (4), *majority* (1), and *nbcomm* (2) constant at their median, and *genvote* (73.2) and *ideology* (0.88) constant at their mean.

switching parties involves more than simply changing a label. In short, switching parties is not a decision to be taken lightly.

In light of this, it is not surprising to find that political parties try to lower the costs of switching. In a way, this is similar to the actions of Democratic minority leader Dick Gephardt following the party switch of Michael Forbes. After Forbes switched to the Democratic party in 1999, Gephardt was on the phone calling local Democrats in Forbes' district and shoring up support for the new member of the caucus. Presumably, Gephardt knew very well that Forbes would need every ounce of support he had to offer. Gephardt was simply trying to make the transition easier for the newly-converted Democrat.¹⁹

Similarly, party leaders can use the committee assignment process to reward a party switcher. This paper shows empirically that this is in fact the case. Party switchers are more likely than non-switchers to be the beneficiaries of a violation of the seniority norm. This proposition and the findings of the paper rest on two critical assumptions: MCs care about their committee assignments and party leaders exert significant influence on the committee assignment process. Both of these assumptions are easily met with respect to congressional committee assignments, which bolsters the theoretical relevance of these findings.

This paper, however, is only the first step toward a better understanding of the processes underlying the decision to switch parties as it applies to committee assignments. By many accounts, some would-be switchers engage in discussions with the other side before deciding whether to change party affiliation. When discussing four potential Democratic switchers at the start of the 106th Congress, a Republican MC said (anonymously): "The campaign (to turn conservative Democrats into loyal Republicans) includes informal offers of committee

¹⁹ This information was provided by Nora Bredes, who ran against Forbes in 1996, during an interview conducted by Christian Grose and I in October 2000.

assignments and seniority.”²⁰ The relationship between committee assignments and party switching thus generally involves interactions between members and leaders, which would lead us to estimate a multi-equation model in order to take account of these dynamics.

Also, with the rise of “subcommittee government” (Davidson 1981; Rohde 1991) it would be relevant to examine how subcommittee assignments are affected by party switching. Anecdotally, one might recall how the assignment to a desirable subcommittee was an issue surrounding the switch of Billy Tauzin in 1995. In the end, though second in seniority to Michael Oxley on the Committee on Commerce, Tauzin was awarded the coveted chairmanship of the subcommittee on Telecommunications and Finance. It is reasonable to expect that this situation would arise with respect to other party switchers as well.

Nevertheless, it is significant from a theoretical point of view to see how switchers are treated following their decision to switch parties. Even in the Senate, where the seniority norm is rarely violated, party switchers have usually been rewarded in the form of desirable committee assignments.²¹ All this is even more evidence that, once again, party “matters.”

²⁰ Jim VandeHei and Ethan Wallison, “GOP Looking for Party Switchers: Four Democrats in House Have Been Approached,” *Roll Call*, January 11, 1999.

²¹ Interestingly, the few party switchers in the Senate since WWII have also been rewarded in their committee assignments. Strom Thurmond, Harry Byrd, Jr., Richard Shelby, and Ben Nighthorse Campbell all kept their seniority (accumulated under their old party) intact. Jim Jeffords was awarded the chairmanship of the Committee on the Environment and Public Works by the Democrats. Even Bob Smith, who declared himself an independent before rejoining the Republican party, was awarded the chairmanship of the Environment Committee after the death of then-chair John Chafee. Finally, it is often said that Wayne Morse’s switch was a famous case of a Senator who was negatively impacted by an uncompensated violation of the seniority norm (see Huitt 1957; Renka and Ponder 2002). However, this interpretation fails to mention that he was awarded a coveted spot on the Foreign Relations Committee by the Democrats after his switch (though with loss of seniority).

References

- Bullock, Charles S., III. 1970. "Apprenticeship and Committee Assignments in the House of Representatives." *Journal of Politics* 32: 717-20.
- Bullock, Charles S., III. 1972. "Freshmen Committee Assignments and Re-election in the United States House of Representatives." *American Political Science Review* 66: 1295-1300.
- Bullock, Charles S., III. 1973. "Committee Transfers in the United States House of Representatives." *Journal of Politics* 35: 85-120.
- Bullock, Charles S. 1975. "Redistricting and Congressional Stability, 1962-72." *Journal of Politics* 37: 569-75.
- Bullock, Charles, and John Sprague. 1969. "A Research Note on the Committee Reassignments of Southern Democratic Congressmen." *Journal of Politics* 31: 493-512.
- Canon, David T. 1992. "The Emergence of the Republican Party in the South, from 1964 to 1988." In *The Atomistic Congress: An Interpretation of Congressional Change*, ed. Allen D. Hertzke and Ronald M. Peters, Jr. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe.
- Clapp, Charles L. 1964. *The Congressman: His Work as He Sees It*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Cox, Gary W., and Matthew D. McCubbins. 1993. *Legislative Leviathan: Party Government in the House*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Crain, W. Mark, and John T. Sullivan. 1997. "Committee Characteristics and Re-Election Margins: An Empirical Investigation of the US House." *Public Choice* 97: 271-85.
- Davidson, Roger H. 1981. "Subcommittee Government: New Channels for Policy Making." In *The New Congress*, ed., Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute.
- Deering, Christopher J., and Steven S. Smith. 1997. *Committees in Congress*, 3rd ed. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press.
- Deering, Christopher J., and Paul J. Wahlbeck. 2002. "Determinants of House Committee Chair Selection: Republicans Play Musical Chairs in the 107th Congress." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, April 25-28.
- Endersby, James W., and Karen M. McCurdy. 1996. "Committee Assignments in the U. S. Senate." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 21: 219-33.
- Fenno, Richard F., Jr. 1966. *The Power of the Purse: Appropriations Politics in Congress*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
- Fenno, Richard F., Jr. 1973. *Congressmen and Committees*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
- Fenno, Richard F., Jr. 1978. *Home Style: House Members in the Districts*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company.
- Fenno, Richard F., Jr. 2000. *Congress at the Grassroots: Representational Change in the South, 1970-1998*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Fowler, Linda L., Scott R. Douglass, and Wesley D. Clark. 1980. "The Electoral Effects of House Committee Assignments." *Journal of Politics* 55: 615-44.
- Frantzich, Stephen E. 1989. *Political Parties in the Technological Age*. New York: Longman.
- Gawthrop, Louis C. 1966. "Changing Membership Patterns in House Committees." *American Political Science Review* 60: 366-73.
- Glaser, James M. 1996. *Race, Campaign Politics, and the Realignment in the South*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

- Glaser, James M. 2001. "When Legislators Change Sides: The Implications of Party Defections in the South." In *Eye of the Storm: The South and Congress in an Era of Change*, ed. John C. Kuzenski, Laurence W. Moreland, and Robert P. Steed. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Goodwin, George, Jr. 1959. "The Seniority System in Congress." *American Political Science Review* 53: 412-36.
- Goodwin, George, Jr. 1970. *The Little Legislatures: Committees of Congress*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Grose, Christian R., and Antoine Yoshinaka. 2003. "The Electoral Consequences of Party Switching by Incumbent Members of Congress, 1947-2000." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 28: 55-75.
- Groseclose, Tim, and Charles Stewart, III. 1998. "The Value of Committee Seats in the House, 1947-91." *American Journal of Political Science* 42: 453-74.
- Hager, Gregory L., and Jeffery C. Talbert. 2000. "Look for the Party Label: Party Influences on Voting in the U.S. House." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 25: 75-99.
- Hibbing, John R. 1991. *Congressional Careers: Contours of Life in the U.S. House of Representatives*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Huitt, Ralph K. 1957. "The Morse Assignment Controversy: A Study in Senate Norms." *American Political Science Review* 51: 313-29.
- Jewell, Malcolm E., and Chu Chi-Hung. 1974. "Membership Movement and Committee Attractiveness in the U.S. House of Representatives, 1963-71." *American Journal of Political Science* 18: 433-41.
- Johnson, Bertram, and Robert Van Houweling. 1999. "The Best Money Congress Can Buy: Legislative Fundraising and the Donor Collective Action Problem." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, April 15-17.
- Kieweit, D. Roderick, and Matthew D. McCubbins. 1991. *The Logic of Delegation: Congressional Parties and the Appropriations Process*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- King, Gary, and Gerald Benjamin. 1986. "The Stability of Party Identification Among U.S. Representatives: Political Loyalty, 1789-1984." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL.
- King, Gary, and Langche Zeng. 2001. "Logistic Regression in Rare Events Data." *Political Analysis* 9: 137-63.
- King, Gary, and Langche Zeng. 2002. "Estimating Risk and Rate Levels, Ratios and Differences in Case-Control Studies." *Statistics in Medicine* 21: 1409-27.
- Krehbiel, Keith. 1998. *Pivotal Politics: A Theory of U.S. Lawmaking*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Manley, John F. 1970. *The Politics of Finance: The House Committee on Ways and Means*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company.
- Maltzman, Forrest. 1997. *Competing Principals: Committees, Parties, and the Organization of Congress*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Masters, Nicholas A. 1961. "Committee Assignments in the House of Representatives." *American Political Science Review* 55: 345-57.
- McCarty, Nolan M., Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal. 2001. "The Hunt for Party Discipline in Congress." *American Political Science Review* 95: 673-87.
- Munger, Michael C. 1988. "Allocation of Desirable Committee Assignments: Extended Queues

- versus Committee Expansion.” *American Journal of Political Science* 32: 317-44.
- Nokken, Timothy P. 2000. “Dynamics of Congressional Loyalty: Party Defection and Roll-Call Behavior, 1947-97.” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 25: 417-44.
- Nokken, Timothy P., and Keith T. Poole. 2001. “Congressional Party Defection in American History.” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, CA, August 30-September 2.
- Oppenheimer, Bruce I. 2000. “The Roll Call Behavior of Members Who Switch Parties, 1900-99: The Effect of Variations in Party Strength.” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, April 27-30.
- Polsby, Nelson W., Miriam Gallaher, and Barry Spencer Rundquist. 1969. “The Growth of the Seniority System in the U.S. House of Representatives.” *American Political Science Review* 63: 787-807.
- Poole, Keith T. 2003. “Changing Minds? Not in Congress!” Manuscript, University of Houston.
- Poole, Keith T., and Howard Rosenthal. 1997. *Congress: A Political-Economic History of Roll Call Voting*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ray, Bruce A. 1982. “Committee Attractiveness in the U.S. House, 1963-1981.” *American Journal of Political Science* 26: 609-13.
- Renka, Russell D., and Daniel E. Ponder. 2002. “The Decline of Committee Seniority in the Modern Congress.” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, April 25-28.
- Riker, William H. 1962. *The Theory of Political Coalitions*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Rohde, David W. 1991. *Parties and Leaders in the Postreform House*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rohde, David W., and Kenneth A. Shepsle. 1973. “Democratic Committee Assignments in the House of Representatives: Strategic Aspects of a Social Choice Process.” *American Political Science Review* 67: 889-905.
- Shepsle, Kenneth A. 1978. *The Giant Jigsaw Puzzle*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sinclair, Barbara. 1988. “The Distribution of Committee Positions in the U.S. Senate: Explaining Institutional Change.” *American Journal of Political Science* 32: 276-301.
- Stewart, Charles, III. 1992. “Committee Hierarchies in the Modernizing House, 1875-1947.” *American Journal of Political Science* 36: 835-56.
- Stewart, Charles, III, and Tim Groseclose. 1999. “The Value of Committee Seats in the United States Senate, 1947-91.” *American Journal of Political Science* 43: 963-73.
- Stratmann, Thomas. 2000. “Congressional Voting over Legislative Careers: Shifting Positions and Changing Constraints.” *American Political Science Review* 94: 665-76.
- Tomz, Michael, Gary King, and Langche Zeng. 1999. “RELOGIT: Rare Events Logistic Regression, Version 1.1.” Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, October 1.
- Tomz, Michael, Gary King, and Langche Zeng. 2003. “ReLogit: Rare Events Logistic Regression.” *Journal of Statistical Software* 8.

Table 1. List of House Party Switchers, 1975-2002

Name of switcher	State	First Congress following switch	Direction of switch	Committee reward
John Jarman	OK	94 th	D to R	Yes
Peter Peyser	NY	96 th	R to D	No
Eugene Atkinson	PA	97 th	D to R	No
Phil Gramm	TX	98 th	D to R	Yes
Andy Ireland	FL	98 th	D to R	No (Yes in 99 th Congress)
Bob Stump	AZ	98 th	D to R	Yes
Bill Grant	FL	101 st	D to R	No
Tommy Robinson	AR	101 st	D to R	No
Nathan Deal	GA	104 th	D to R	Yes
Jimmy Hayes	LA	104 th	D to R	Yes
Greg Laughlin	TX	104 th	D to R	Yes
Mike Parker	MS	104 th	D to R	Yes
Billy Tauzin	LA	104 th	D to R	Yes
Wes Watkins	OK	105 th	D to R	No
Michael Forbes	NY	106 th	R to D	Yes
Virgil Goode	VA	106 th	D to I	No
Matthew Martinez	CA	106 th	D to R	No
Virgil Goode	VA	107 th	I to R	Yes

Table 2. Party Switching and Rewards in Violation of the Seniority Norm

	<i>Rewards in violation of the seniority norm given to...</i>
...a party switcher	58% (11 out of 19 party switchers in the sample)
...a non-switcher	18% (22 out of 122 instance of non-switchers in the sample)

Table 3. Rare-Events Logit Regression Model of Reward in Violation of Seniority Norm

<i>Independent variables</i>	<i>B (s.e.)</i>
Switch	3.259 (1.33)**
Terms	0.235 (0.06)***
Genvote	-0.042 (0.02)**
Post1994	1.503 (0.53)***
Majority	0.621 (0.56)
Ideodist	-0.669 (0.51)
Nbcomm	-0.008 (0.40)
Constant	-4.968 (1.38)***
N	141

*** Significant at the 0.01 level; ** significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed test).

Table 4. Probability of Being Rewarded With Violation of Seniority Norm

	Non-switchers	Switchers
Pre-1994	0.0008	0.0209
Post-1994	0.0037	0.0925