

Ideology and party switching: A comparison of 12 West European countries

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Abstract

Party switching can pose a severe threat to party unity and deepen internal party division. To date, research on party switching has either focused on the individual motivations for changing party or on the effects of macro-level settings. The role of party-level variables, however, has received surprisingly little attention in the literature. In particular the impact of ideology has rarely been assessed. This paper tests whether specific aspects related to parties' ideology (i.e. extremism, isolation, authoritarianism, programmatic clarity and stability) are linked to different levels of defection. To this purpose I rely on an original database on party switching in twelve Western European countries from 1999 to 2015, supplemented with variables from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey. The results of multilevel negative binomial analyses show that indeed ideology and its various components have a substantial impact on the scope of switching. For instance, parties promoting authoritarian values suffer from a higher number of defectors. Moreover, parties with more unstable labels seem to be more subjected to switching. This paper improves our understanding of how party ideology is related to party unity and, more generally, to legislative dynamics.

Introduction

To perform its functions, a representative democracy requires united political parties (Bowler, Farrell, and Katz 1999). Party unity is necessary for cabinet stability, policy bargaining, but also to ensure politicians' accountability. The way in which parties act as unitary actors has been challenged on two grounds. On the one hand, several studies (Carty 2004; Bolleyer 2012) have shown that from an organizational perspective, parties are not monolithic entities, but rather a "complex and variegated sets of persons and structures, each of which are, or could be, independent actors within the party" (Olson 2003, p.165). This has led scholars to study more in depth intra-party organizations, that is, whether and how members organize into factions and the impact that these subgroups have on, for instance, cabinet durability (Saalfeld 2009), policy-making (Giannetti and Laver 2009), party splits (Ceron 2015), party cohesion and discipline (Depauw and Martin 2009) and electoral volatility (Gherghina 2014). On the other hand, the literature has also shown that parties not only organize into factions, but they also act in a non-unitary way and their members in parliament (MPs) do not always stick to the party line. Research conducted, e.g., by Kam (2009) and Sieberer (2006) has shown that rebellion votes are not so infrequent in Western democracies. Therefore, party unity varies across countries, parties (Close and Gherghina 2017) and over time.

In extreme circumstances, rebellious MPs change party affiliation and such a behaviour, usually called "party switching", raises threats to party stability, unity or credibility (O'Brien and Shomer 2013) and to voters' ability to hold their representatives accountable (Heller and Mershon 2009). Additionally, defections can affect policy-making within assemblies or even endanger the stability of governments (Giannetti and Laver 2001). Finally, party switching has also substantial theoretical implications. Indeed, it sheds light on party change and dynamics within election and it might be considered as an alternative way of measuring party unity in parliament.

Previous studies on switching have either analysed the reasons that drive switchers or the institutional settings that make this behaviour more likely to occur. In other words, the focus has either been on individuals and their motivations (Di Virgilio, Giannetti, and Pinto 2012; Heller and Mershon 2005) or on countries and their vulnerability to this phenomenon (McLaughlin 2012; Kreuzer and Pettai 2009). This paper adopts an approach that is more similar to the institutional one, but it focuses on political parties. The role of party characteristics on defection has always been recognized by the literature (Di Virgilio, Giannetti, and Pinto 2012; Heller and Mershon 2005). However, party features are usually not tested per se, but they are used

as proxies to uncover switchers' goals. For instance, Gherghina (2016) tests whether parties in opposition are more subjected to switching in order to see whether MPs are driven by career advancement concerns. As party features are not at the centre of the explanation, we still know very little about whether and how party characteristics are related to different switching rates, both theoretically and empirically.

In particular, few studies have explored the connection between ideology and unity (Owens 2003). This paper aims at filling this gap, by exploring whether ideology can explain some of the variation in the level of defections across countries and parties. In order to test my hypotheses I rely on an original dataset on party switching in twelve Western European countries from 1999 to 2015 and supplement it with variables from the Chapel Hill Expert Surveys (CHES)(Polk et al. 2017; Bakker et al. 2015) and the ParlGov database (Döring and Manow 2015). The article is structured as follows: after a discussion of the theory and related hypotheses, I present the research design and the measurement of variable; in the third section I show the results of several statistical models and I conclude with some final remarks.

Theory and hypotheses

The literature on party switching has usually tried to uncover the motivations that lead politician to cross the floor. MPs are considered as rational actors who try to maximize their interest and they change party in order to serve their goals (Heller and Mershon 2005). This stream of literature has enhanced our knowledge of individual reasons for changing party, yet it has not been fully able to explain why the scope of switching varies across countries, parties and time. If politicians are driven by similar goals, (identified in literature as policy, office and vote (Müller and Strøm 1999)), this does not account for the fact that defections are not so common among all political parties in Europe. There must be something else. This paper moves away from the individual perspective and focuses on the relationship between party characteristics and the patterns of switching. In particular I analyse one macro-feature, namely ideology. So far, the connection between ideology and switching has been researched only by Mejia Acosta (2004) in his analysis of defection in Ecuador. The literature has more often looked at whether the distance between an MP ideal point and the policy preferences of his/her party affect the decision to switch (Desposato 2006; Pinto 2015). Thus, the link between parties' ideology and their vulnerability to switching has not received large attention so far.

Ideology affects the probability of a party to witness switching for two reasons. First, according to Sartori (1976) ideology is highly correlated to cohesion. Similarly, Owens

(2003) states that parties' values are a key factor to explain their level of cohesion and discipline. The mechanism linking ideology and loyalty (one of the dimensions of party unity) has been analysed by Close (2016), who illustrates how ideology affects both MPs' perception of their role and party organizations. Ideology shapes the representational style that legislators adopt: e.g., liberal parties embody values as individualism and – as a consequence – their MPs will behave in a more individualistic manner. Ideology also affects parties' organizational structures and the level of internal democracy, that – in turn – might have an influence over legislators' behaviour (Gauja 2013). To put it shortly, ideology potentially affects MPs' attitudes and behaviour both directly and indirectly. As ideology affects unity, then most likely it also influences switching, which represents an extreme forms of disunity.

Second, according the categories developed by Hirschman (1970), Kato (1998) and, in this same issue, by Pedersen and Nielsen, for certain MPs "exit" (that is changing party) is sometimes a more valuable option than "voice". The decision of exiting versus staying in the party comes at specific costs for legislators. I argue that among the many factors that may determine these costs there is also ideology. Indeed, parties' ultimate values affects the room granted to MPs to express their discontent. Certain parties encourage and tolerate much more that their legislators and members voice their disagreement. In other groups, on the contrary, dissent is not allowed, with the result that MPs – in case of conflict – have no option but exit their party. To put it simply, my argument is that since the exit and voice are inversely related, switching (exit) occurs more frequently in those parties in which is more difficult to express dissatisfaction (voice).

Nevertheless, as López and Close (2016) underline, ideology is an extremely complex concept, that can only be partially grasped using parties' ideological position on the left-right scale. For this reason, this paper looks at the theoretical and empirical connection between switching and different understandings of ideology: the spatial dimension, with the extremity of parties' position (H1) and their isolation (H2), parties' values (H3), with their clarity (H4) and stability over time (H5). Let us now turn to each of these variables and explain how the may influence defection.

Extremism and Isolation

Although party placement is the most used proxy for ideology, its impact over party switching has been rarely tested. Moreover, a clear theoretical argument linking ideological placement and switching is missing. If the relationship between party position and defection is still unclear, there is another factor that instead has received

more attention in the literature, i.e. ideological extremism. The argument is that what matters is the extremity of party position, rather than ideological placement per se. When a party is placed at the extreme of the ideological spectrum, its MPs can only switch towards the centre. In other words, they have fewer options compared to members of centrist parties, who instead face appeals from two sides (Morgenstern 2003). Moreover, extremist parties are usually believed to have a clearer ideology (Mejia Acosta 2004) and they are generally more faithful to their values and less sensitive to public opinion, which makes them also more cohesive (Rahat 2007). However, for what concerns switching, these expectations might not apply. In fact, extremist parties stress the importance of principles and values, thus, the internal ideological discussion might be more acute. Additionally, the willingness to remain faithful to ideology (Rahat 2007) might restrict the space for legislators with alternative views. Therefore, in case of conflict or excessive debate around a specific issue, the only realistic option for dissidents is leaving the party. This argument is coherent with Hirschman's scheme: in extremist parties it might be more difficult for MPs to voice their discontent. Discipline might be so tight that – in case of conflict – there are no alternative but switching. The expectation therefore is opposite than what posed by the literature so far: more extremist parties might be more disciplined, but this might lead to a higher number of switchers.

Extremism looks at the ideology of individual parties. However, the opportunity of switching might be also affected by the presence/absence of other political parties that are ideologically close to the one of origin. If a party is isolated in the political space, it is more difficult for potential switchers to find a group able to welcome them, simply because there are no alike parties around. Not only the availability of similar parties is lower, but also the ideological "transformation" undertaken by defectors is deeper and more difficult to achieve and justify to voters. On the contrary, when a party is relatively close to others (a likely circumstance, especially under coalition governments) it is easier to find akin political platforms and a conversion is less tricky to defend.

The ideological isolation of a party in most of the cases might be greater for extremist parties, however this is not always the case. In fact, there could be a system with a centrist party distant from clusters of parties on its right and/or left. In this case we have a party that is not extreme, but that is isolated. To put it simply, ideological extremism and isolation do not necessarily overlap. For this reason the two factors are analysed separately. Following these arguments, I expect that:

Hypothesis 1 *An extreme placement of the party in the political space favour defections.*

Hypothesis 2 *Less ideological isolation of parties favours defections.*

Values, ideological clarity and stability

The limitation of using a spatial understanding of ideology is that it does not grasp parties' principles, which instead are determinant for legislators' representational style and – as a consequence – for switching. While it can be argued that parties' placement on the left-right scale indeed correspond to specific set of beliefs (Hinich and Munger 1992), it is problematic to exactly determine parties' values by looking only at their position on the left-right spectrum. Moreover, often the left-right continuum conceives ideology only in terms of economic policy, while for my argument, the cultural dimension is more relevant. This cultural dimension, called by Inglehart (1977) "the postmaterialist-materialist cleavage" and by Kitschelt (1994) "authoritarian-libertarian cleavage", has at its core the concepts of hierarchy and tolerance (Stubager 2010). Authoritarians favour the rank ordering of individuals and do not tolerate deviations from conventional norms. On the contrary, libertarians promote parity in social interactions, and show a high degree of tolerance for non-conformity. In other words, authoritarians stresses the importance of law and order, while libertarians embody principles like personal freedom and self-affirmation (Close 2016).

These values are crucial also for party switching. Indeed, we can expect that parties with authoritarian values might also not be tolerant towards dissenting positions among their members and legislators. Conversely, parties that promote libertarian values, might encourage the expression of deviating positions. In Hirschman's terms, I expect that libertarian parties display a higher degree of "voice" which makes them more immune to switching, while authoritarian parties, discourage "voice" and therefore leave no other option to potential dissidents but exiting the party.

Ideology as values (static - II): *Programmatic clarity*

Parties' platforms are often difficult to pin down exactly. There is always a certain degree of uncertainty regarding parties' stances on specific issues (Bräuninger and Giger 2016). According to Rovny (2012), parties intentionally keep their platforms vague, because this is electorally helpful. Moreover, some parties have not only very ambiguous policy platforms, but they also represent a wide range of values and beliefs. To put it simply, not all parties have clear-cut ideologies. Indeed, Gunther and Diamond (2001) use programmatic clarity to classify different kinds of parties. According to the authors, catch-all parties are characterized by vague platforms, while

programmatic and mass parties have clear policy manifestos and are ideologically sound (Giebler et al. 2015). Gunther and Diamond (2001) state that parties with ambiguous preferences have a greater ability to support coalitions as they can accommodate partners thanks to their policy flexibility. Similarly, these kind of parties are also able to host legislators with very different sets of beliefs. As there is no well-defined ideology, there is also no pressure to stick to the party line and MPs have probably more room to express their views, even when they are conflicting with each other. In Hirschman's scheme, in these parties the level of "voice" should be greater than in parties whose platform is clearly defined and less flexible. As a consequence, the expectation is that the lower the ideological clarity, the less likely that legislators will recur to switching.

The previous factors look at parties' ideology at one specific point in time. However, platforms are not stable over time and they can change significantly between two elections (Schumacher, De Vries, and Vis 2013). For instance, parties from the right might shift their policy preferences towards the centre or to more extreme positions and the same can happen to leftist groups. The literature has studied why parties would modify their platforms and it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the several findings of this stream of research (for a summary, see Fagerholm 2016). For the purpose of this work, what matters are the consequences of these position shifts for the behaviour of MPs and for the decision to change party.

According to Heller and Mershon (2005), "uncertainty about party policy makes it likely that MPs will at times find party dictates on legislation to be at odds with their own or their supporters' preferences" (p.539). Similarly, Ames (2009) states that when parties are unstable, legislators' voting behaviour cannot be predicted by their affiliation and they often defect with impunity. The research on party switching thus expects parties with blurred and unstable platforms to witness more defections (Desposato 2006). Moreover, as the literature on policy shifts has shown, parties usually change their platforms after an electoral defeat (Somer-Topcu 2009). Poor electoral performances are one of the main determinants of switching, as politicians leave their party if they fear an electoral loss (Gherghina 2016; Klein 2016). A policy shift might therefore be considered as a clue for electoral concerns that – in turn – might induce switching.

From a party perspective, a shift in the programmatic platform might also come at a cost. Indeed, the change most likely will disappoint part of the party members, no matter what triggers it (electoral defeats, leadership alternation). Some members will feel the new course as a betrayal of the original parties' values and will consider the exit option in order to preserve them, and this is particularly true for parties with well-defined ideologies (Salucci 2008). To summarize, parties with unstable platforms

are more subjected to switching because programmatic change can disappoint part of the membership. Moreover, a value review might be linked to an electoral defeat that represents a great concern for legislators, who then might prefer to leave the sinking ship.

All these arguments lead to the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3 *Authoritarian values of parties favour defections.*

Hypothesis 4 *Programmatic clarity favours defections.*

Hypothesis 5 *Unstable ideological position favours defections.*

Data, measurement and methods

The five hypotheses are tested using a self-collected dataset on all the defections¹ that occurred in twelve Western European democracies² from 1999 to 2015. The unit of analysis are party-years, that is one observation corresponds to a party in a given year. The dependent variable (*Switchers*) counts the number of switchers that each party witnessed within a year. As can be seen from the descriptive statistics (Table A1, Appendix), the overall average number of switchers is low. Considering all countries together, the mean number of changes per year is almost 0.6. Moreover, the variable's distribution is extremely skewed towards the left, i.e. most observations take value 0.

Turning to the independent variables, the first hypothesis looks at ideological extremism. In order to calculate this, I retrieved parties' position in the political space from the CHES (variable *LRgen*³). Then, I calculated the absolute value of the distance between each party's position and the centre of the spectrum, which equals 5. The variable *Extreme* therefore ranges from 0 (centrist party) to 5 (extremist party). I expect that when the variable *Extreme* increases, the number of switchers increases as well.

The second hypothesis discusses the role of isolation, which is operationalized as the average mean distance of a party from all the others in the system. Distances are

¹I adopt a more restricted definition of switching, compared to the most used one by Heller and Mershon (2009). While the two authors count as switches also label changes, I discarded them. I considered as switching the following situations: switching to a party already existing, becoming independent, party merging and splits and establishment of a new parliamentary group. Moreover, my data have been collected through an analysis of parliamentary archives, therefore only in case the switch has been recorded, I counted it.

²Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, The Netherlands, Spain, United Kingdom. Norway and Switzerland are not included because they are not in the CHES. Sweden and Portugal are not part of the dataset because of considerable problems in collecting the data on defectors.

³It ranges from 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right).

calculated in absolute values. The variable obtained is called *Isolation* and as it increases, the number of switchers should become smaller.

The third hypothesis analyses the connection between values and switching. In order to measure how authoritarian are parties' values, I retrieved parties' position on the so called GAL/TAN dimension ⁴ made available by the CHES. The index ranges from 0 (extreme GAL) to 10 (extreme TAN) and measures exactly how parties' values are close/far from the authoritarian tradition. The expectation is that the greater the score of a party on the scale, the higher the number of defections.

The fourth hypothesis concerns the impact of programmatic clarity. The operationalization of this variable is challenging. I decided to use the standard deviation of each party's position as calculated in the expert surveys (variable *LRgen sd*). This indicator is far from being perfect, because it measures variation in experts' perceived positions of a party. As Bräuninger and Giger (2016) point out, this variation can either be the result of an effective programmatic vagueness, but it might also reveal the difficulty faced by experts in placing parties on the ideological space. Nevertheless, despite its limitations, this index is the best option given that other measures (e.g. those proposed by Bräuninger and Giger (2016) or by Giebler et al. (2015)) are not available for the full set of cases considered in this work. The expectation is that the larger the standard deviation of a party's position, the lower the number of switchers.

Finally, ideological stability is measured as shifts in parties' position on the left-right scale between two waves of the CHES (variable $\Delta LRgen$). As I am not interested in the direction of the change, but only in its magnitude, the index is calculated in absolute terms. As descriptive statistics reveal, the variable obtained ranges from 0, when a party's placement has not changed, to 2 (the maximum shift recorded)⁵. Based on the fifth hypothesis, larger values of $\Delta LRgen$ should correspond to a higher number of defections.

For what concerns controls, I add the following five variables:

- *Tenure*: measures the years a party has been in parliament. Tenure is a proxy of party institutionalization that might affect the level of switching witnessed (Ceron 2015).
- *Governing status*: I control for the governing status of a party because according to several authors parties in power should be more immune to defections (Desposato

⁴Green-Alternative-Libertarian versus Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist continuum (Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson 2002).

⁵The theoretical maximum is 10. Thus, ideological stability is the rule.

2006; Di Virgilio, Giannetti, and Pinto 2012). The variable takes value 0 when a party has been in opposition in a given year, and 1 otherwise. Scores were retrieved by the ParlGov database.

- *Size*: calculated as seat share, it is included because the literature suggests that smaller parties might be more subjected to switching (Heller and Mershon 2005; Laver and Benoit 2003).
- *Party system fragmentation*: measured as the "effective number of parliamentary parties" (ENPP) (Laakso and Taagepera 1979). I include this control because it has been shown that the higher the level of fragmentation, the larger the opportunities for defecting.
- *Party system institutionalization*: operationalized as electoral volatility, as one of the most common index for party system instability (Chiaramonte and Emanuele 2015). I add this control because the literature has shown that defections are more numerous in weakly institutionalized settings (Kreuzer and Pettai 2009; Mainwaring 1998). Information on electoral volatility was retrieved from the dataset by Emanuele (2015).

Given that my dependent variable is a count variable, data is analysed with a negative binomial model, to account for the over-dispersion of the dependent variable⁶ (Long 1997). Moreover, in order to account for party size, I include an *exposure variable* that measures it. This exposure variable allows to adjust the estimation for the amount of opportunity an event has. In other words, it treats the count variable as a ratio. The risk of omitting the exposure variable is that larger parties always result having a higher number of switchers simply because they have a greater set of potential defectors. The advantage of the exposure variable is that it can be included in the estimation as well. In order to control for the hierarchical structure of the data, I use a random-effect model. The final dataset includes 1217 observations, from 111 parties nested in 12 countries.

Results and discussion

The results of the multivariate statistical analysis are presented in Table 1. Each hypothesis is tested separately from the others, in order to avoid potential problems of multicollinearity. The first model looks at the relationship between parties' extremism and the number of switchers. According to Hypothesis 1, the expectation is that more

⁶As most of the observation take value 0, the variance of dependent variable exceeds the mean.

Table 1: Results of Negative Binomial models of party switching (Random Effects)

VARIABLES	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Tenure	-0.017* (0.01)	-0.014 (0.01)	-0.018* (0.01)	-0.015+ (0.01)	-0.020* (0.01)
Govt	0.250 (0.25)	0.244 (0.25)	0.195 (0.25)	0.210 (0.25)	0.210 (0.25)
ENPP	-0.165 (0.10)	-0.141 (0.10)	-0.129 (0.10)	-0.137 (0.10)	-0.140 (0.11)
Seat share	-2.266* (0.98)	-1.698+ (1.00)	-1.782+ (0.98)	-2.018* (1.00)	-2.135* (1.00)
Volatility	0.022+ (0.01)	0.021+ (0.01)	0.024* (0.01)	0.015 (0.01)	0.022+ (0.01)
Extreme	0.396** (0.14)				
Isolation		0.640*** (0.16)			
GAL/TAN			0.190** (0.07)		
LRgen sd				-0.658* (0.33)	
Δ LRgen					0.543* (0.27)
Constant	-4.628*** (0.68)	-4.780*** (0.72)	-4.139*** (0.64)	-5.655*** (0.78)	-3.164*** (0.69)
Country	0.231 (0.25)	0.253 (0.26)	0.262 (0.26)	0.166 (0.23)	0.294 (0.28)
Party	1.339** (0.44)	1.553** (0.49)	1.416** (0.46)	1.651** (0.51)	1.599** (0.50)
Alpha (Ln)	1.031*** (0.13)	0.996*** (0.13)	1.032*** (0.13)	0.940*** (0.13)	0.990*** (0.13)
Observations	1.215	1.217	1.217	1.217	1.21
Number of groups	12	12	12	12	12
Wald chi2 (6)	25.20	24.73	19.99	32.95	19.50
Prob > chi2	0.001	0.001	0.003	0.001	0.003

Standard errors in parentheses; *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.1

extremist parties should witness more switchers. The coefficient of the variable *Extreme* is positive and statistically significant, thus in line with the hypothesis. This result suggests that more extremist parties are not better able to maintain/enforce unity. The effect of the variable is considerable, given that the number of defections for the most extremist parties is above 2, while for centrist group the prediction is below the overall mean (0.5) (Figure 1a).

Hypothesis 2 states that ideological isolation should represent a protection from defections. On the contrary, the statistical analysis (Model 2) returns a positive and significant coefficient for the variable *Isolation*. This means that the farther a party is from the other groups in the system, the greater the number of switcher. The effect of the variable is the largest observed (Figure 1b), as the expected number of switchers for isolated parties is around 3. This finding might explained by the fact that there is no point in changing affiliation when the original and receiving parties are so similar to each other. The policy differences – and most likely also their governing/office status – are so little that switching becomes pointless. If it is true that concealing a switch between two contiguous parties might be easier, the risk is that switchers do not achieve anything with their action, neither in policy or in office terms. Additionally, a very isolated party has less chances to find potential partners in future elections and therefore it risks an electoral defeat. Thus, those MPs who are seeking re-election might be induced to change alliance. To summarize, no matter what the motivations of switchers are, an isolated party is not a pay-off option and this might be why MPs tend to leave them more frequently. This argument might also help us to explain why switching does not occur very frequently: defection is costly and legislators are willing to pay the price only if they fully reach their goals.

Turning to the variables that measure parties' values, according to Hypothesis 3, the closer to the TAN pole a party is, the greater the scope of defections. The coefficient of the variable *GAL/TAN* is positive and statistically significant, hence in line with the hypothesis. Parties that promote values like law and order are also less able to keep their ranks together. Moreover, the effect of the variable is substantial. As it can be seen in Figure 1c, a party with the maximum TAN score is expected to have almost 2 switchers, whereas at the opposite end of the spectrum, the predicted number of defections is slightly below the overall mean.

Based on Hypothesis 4, parties with more unclear platforms should witness less switchers. As Model 4 shows, the coefficient of the variable *LRgen sd* is negative and statistically significant. This result meets the expectation of Hypothesis 4 and it implies that the larger the uncertainty around a party's placement on the left-right

scale, the lower the number of defections. The effect of *LRgen sd* is smaller compared to other explanatory variables, yet not negligible. As Figure 1d reveals, very cohesive groups are expected to witness 1.5 switchers, but this number falls below average for parties with more unclear positions.

The fifth hypothesis (Model 5) finds also supports from the analysis. According to the theory presented, the more unstable party positions are, the larger the scope of switching. The related variable (Δ *LRgen*) has a positive sign and significant effect. As shown by Figure 1e, parties that did not undergo through a substantial revision of their platforms are expected to have 0.5 switchers, while parties with unstable programs witness almost two defections per year.

Finally, for what concerns control variables, more experienced parties are – in line with what predicted by the literature – also more stable (significant and negative coefficient). Parties in government are usually considered to be more united than parties in opposition, but my analysis returns a different result: variable *Govt* is positive, yet it does not reach statistical significance. Interestingly enough, larger parties are also less subjected to switching, in line with what found by research on other dimensions of party unity (Close 2016). At the party system level, the effect of fragmentation is not confirmed by the analysis, as the coefficient of the variable *ENPP* is not statistically significant (and it is negative, i.e. opposite to expectations). On the contrary, volatility seems to boost parliamentary disunity. Very volatile elections are followed by a greater level of switching during the legislative term. This finding supports the idea that defections are also the product of low party system institutionalization.

To summarize the main findings, the analysis has shown the following ideological traits are associated with a greater number of defections:

- Being an extremist party;
- Being a very isolated party in the political space;
- Embedding authoritarian values;
- Having a well defined ideological position;
- Having an unstable ideological position over time.

⁷Graphs created with the figure schemes developed by Bischof (2017).

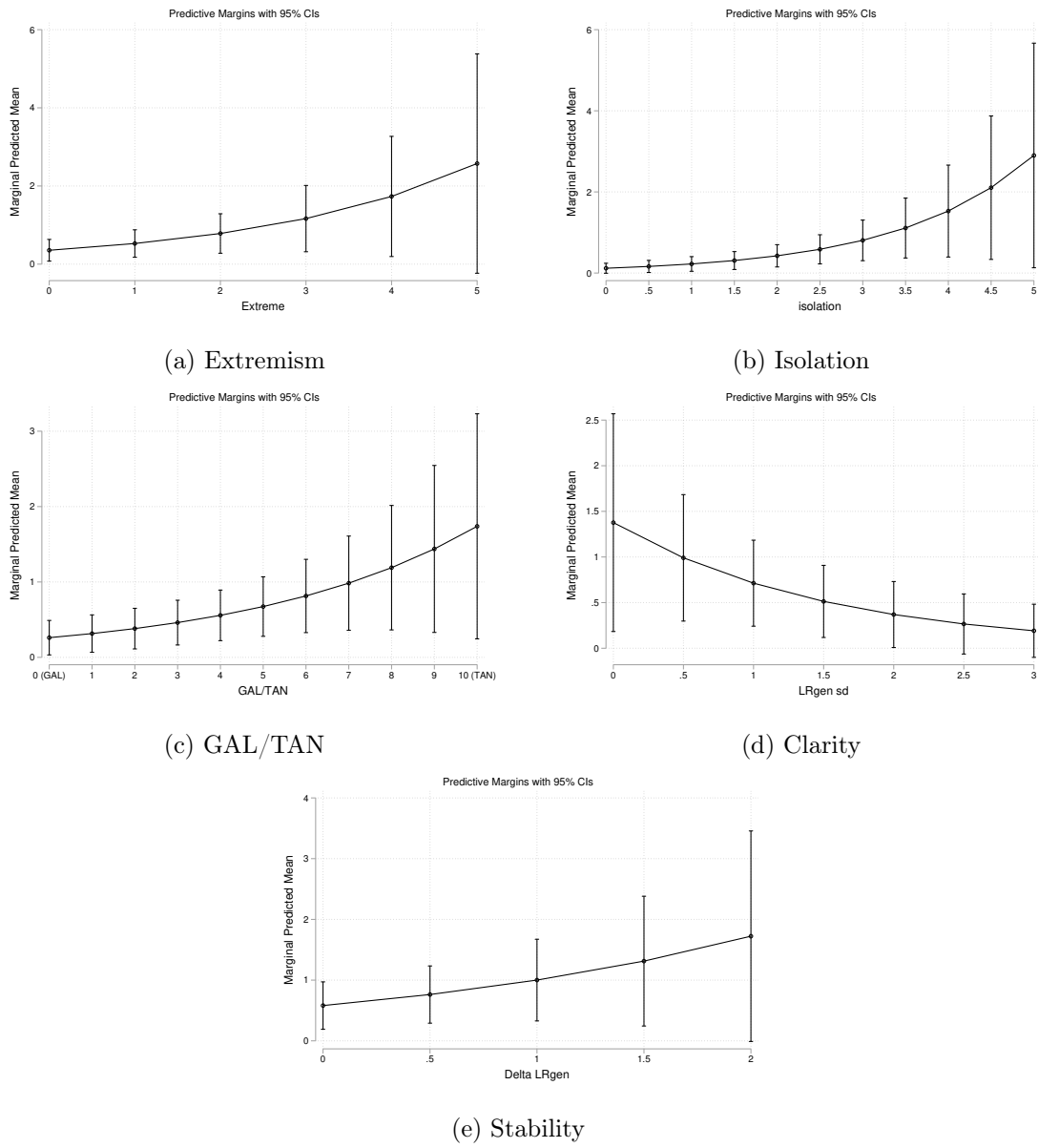


Figure 1: Marginal effect of the key explanatory variables ⁷

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to shed light on the relationship between party ideology and unity, looking at a very specific form of party dis-unity, that is defection. The importance of ideology has been largely neglected by both the literature on unity and the one on switching. This paper tried to fill this gap, bringing parties and their ideological features at the centre of the explanation.

Political parties profoundly influence the behaviour and attitudes of their MPs. As Kam (2001) reminds us, party affiliation is a better predictor of a legislator's behaviour than his/her preferences. This argument suggests that party characteristics might be linked to different levels of unity and switching. Among all parties' features, ideology has a determinant role in shaping MPs' behaviour. Indeed, as clarified by Close (2016), ideology affects both the representational style of MPs, who act in a more or less independent way from their group, and the level of intra-party democracy, that is the internal tolerance for dissenting views. I tested whether this argument holds also when we look at party switching, that is another dimension of (dis)unity. Given that ideology is a multifaceted concept, I looked at whether various understandings of ideology are associated with different levels of defections. The results of my analysis confirmed this intuition, as all the ideological variables tested have a significant and (in most of the cases) substantial effect on the number of defections experienced by the parties analysed. These results are particularly solid as they hold across twelve polities and more than 15 years. To put it simply, my analysis shows that ideology, in its various meanings, is indeed linked with different levels of party switching.

My theoretical expectations and results are partially conflicting with previous literature on unity. In particular, ideological extremism, clarity and isolation have proven to induce switching, rather than reducing it. Also the result that parties with authoritarian values are more unstable contradicts the finding that extreme right groups are usually more united (like, for instance, Mejia Acosta 2004). Nevertheless, the results of my analysis are coherent with each other. In particular, extremism, isolation, authoritarianism, and programmatic clarity, are all characteristics that can be theoretically associated to a smaller room for dissent. Therefore, the fact that these features are all related to higher number of defections suggests that switching occurs in those parties that do not allow multiple views, but rather impose one strict line. In other words, switching is triggered by an absence of "voice". On the contrary, parties that grant to their members more freedom of opinion are more immune to "exit". To put it simply, Hirschman's scheme seems to work fairly well when applied to switching.

Clearly, this is only one plausible explanation to make sense of the findings of my analysis. More theoretical work is needed to shed light on what makes more authoritarian parties so exposed to defection. What is it specific of authoritarian ideology that makes parties less tolerant towards different opinions and views? Moreover, the results of my analysis would benefit from any index that could capture and measure the level of voice granted to party members and MPs. To put it differently, my results would be more solid if I could show that the features that are linked with more switching are also predictors for lower levels of intra-party democracy. The challenge is to find a good indicator for all the countries and the time frame covered by my dataset. It is for this reason that, for instance, I could not use for this work the index developed by the Political Party Database (Poguntke et al. 2016).

Alternatively, I could try to look at different kinds of defections. Under the label "switching" fall indeed different types of behaviour. In particular we can distinguish between individual and collective forms of switching. Individual defectors are those who change party affiliation without coordinating with other fellows. Collective switches, instead, are rather the results of party merges or splitting. In this case, individual MPs switch in order to stay faithful to their faction. The underlying logic of collective and individual switching are different and the mechanisms that lead to these two forms of defections might also not be the same. Looking at these two types of switching separately might help to test whether parties from different ideological traditions experience different kinds of defections. For instance, switchers from authoritarian parties might change affiliation only collectively, while – on the contrary – more libertarian parties might be more subjected to individual movements, as an effect of the representational style promoted by these groups.

Moreover, it is plausible that some of the factors analysed in this paper explain better one form of switching than the other. For instance, ideological stability and isolation might be at the origin of collective changes. A programmatic shift might trigger the reaction of an entire factions that does not approve the ideological revision, like in the aforementioned case of the Italian Communist Party. Similarly, very isolated parties might arrive at a stage in their political life in which they have to decide whether they want to make compromise and get fully involved or to stay away from any possible coalition. The tension generated by these two contrary strategy might as well result in a split between the two opposing factions. To summarize, when we take into account the collective or individual nature of defections, the five ideological factors analysed in this paper might not have the same explanatory power.

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Appendix

Table A1: Descriptive statistics

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Year	1223	2.006	4.82	1999	2015
Switchers	1223	.576	3.24	0	74
Seat	1223	5.296	7.67	1	419
LRgen	1223	4.887	2.22	.22	9.888
GAL/TAN	1223	4.748	2.28	.63	9.75
LRgen sd	1216	.861	.37	0	3.420
Tenure	1223	3.475	2.10	0	70
Seat share	1223	.154	.15	.002	.636
ENPP	1223	4.434	1.96	2.119	9.054
Δ Lrgen	1223	.41	.368	0	2.088
Extreme	1223	1.925	1.11	0	4.888
Volatility	1217	1.391	7.37	4	48.50
Govt	1223	.389	.487	0	1
Isolation	1223	2.783	.86	1.115	5.855