

Party Switching in the Canadian Federal Context: 1867-2014

Feodor Snagovsky
School of Political Studies
University of Ottawa

Matthew Kerby
School of Political Studies
University of Ottawa

Character Count: 50802

Introduction

Political parties are central features of democratic governance. They serve not only as a vehicle for electing candidates to office, but also as the principal mechanism by which they are held accountable when elections take place. In this context, party switching has been often seen as an inappropriate, sometimes pathological political behavior for political actors and observers alike¹. Traditionally understood as a rare event, recent country case research suggests that party switching is not as elusive as expected and it appears to be reasonably common in several polities: South Africa, Japan, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nepal, Russia, the Philippines, France, Italy and Brazil². Indeed, nearly a quarter of all legislators in the Italian Chamber of Deputies changed parties at least once in the 1996-2001 legislature; party switchers have brought down local governments in Spain and shifted the balance of power in the United States Senate. In Canada, the defection of a Member of Parliament (MP) from the official opposition to the minority government front bench in 2005 prevented the toppling of the government on a vote of no-confidence³. Party switching should not be ignored or written off as an anomaly, kink, or outlier.

A focus on the substantive effects of party switching, however, does not relieve us of its normative implications. Political parties are necessary tools in democratic systems as they decrease information costs to voters, increase government accountability, and serve as mechanisms of representation, debate and compromise⁴. In theory, voters can make meaningful distinctions among candidates and easily gather information regarding their policy preferences based on party affiliation as parties “bring people together behind political agendas and candidates, thus reducing political fragmentation” and connect government to the governed⁵. In this context, party switching may be a threat to the link between politicians, parties and the electorate, and a way in which political opportunism can further erode levels of public trust in the political system. Barrow, for example, points to the increasingly common practice of Mexican politicians switching parties, often multiple times, and sometimes to parties with very different ideological commitments. She notes that, “these trends lessen parties’ capacity to provide

¹ McElroy, Gail, “Intra-Party Politics at the Transnational Level: Party Switching in the European Parliament.” In, Giannetti, Daniela & Benoit, Kenneth, *Intra-Party Politics and Coalition Governments in Parliamentary Democracies*. London: Routledge, p205, 2008.

² Desposato, Scott, “Parties for Rent? Ambition, Ideology, and Party Switching in Brazil’s Chamber of Deputies.” In, *American Journal of Political Science*, volume 50, n°1, p62, 2006.

³ Heller, William & Mershon, Carol, “Introduction: Legislative Party Switching, Parties, and Party Systems.” In, Heller, William & Mershon, Carol, *Political Parties and Legislative Party Switching*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p4-7, 2009.

⁴ Aldrich, John, *Why Parties? The Origin and Transformation of Political Parties in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995; Desposato, “Parties for Rent?”; Downs, Anthony, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. New York: Harper and Row, 1957; Fiorina, Morris, *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981.

⁵ Barrow, Lynda, “Party On? Politicians and Party Switching in Mexico.” *Politics*, volume 27, n°3, p167, 2007.

coherent and unified alternatives while calling into question parties' and legislators' ability to serve their representative functions"⁶.

Regardless of normative positions, party switching provides a window into the nature of democratic governance, party systems, and electoral mechanisms. While some have pointed to party switching as evidence that "parties don't matter," others have argued precisely the opposite: if parties did not matter, politicians would not bother switching⁷. Thus, and in this context party switching can provide insight into the underlying preferences of political actors and the incentive structure of party systems.

In this chapter, we review some of the existing literature on party switching and make the case that party switching is a product of both the individual motivations of politicians, driven by the prospect of ideological, legislative, electoral and career payoffs, and the institutional context in which they operate. While party switching is fundamentally an individual phenomenon⁸, institutional considerations such as the balance of power in a legislature, the institutionalization of the party system, the point at which legislators find themselves in the parliamentary cycle, and the structure of the electoral system can all shape the broad patterns of party switching. We follow the review by introducing a unique dataset that contains the population of Canadian party switches in the federal level House of Commons and provide a topography of party switching for the period between 1867 and 2014.

Our initial overview reveals that while the frequency of turnover has increased over time, there is no real pattern to the distribution of the party switches. However, when broken down by individual parliament, there appears to be a relationship between the number of parties in the party system and party switching. We identify a sea change in the 1960s whereby the majority of party switches shifted from those in anticipation of an election to those that took place mid-parliament. We also note that the electoral payoff of party switching in Canada appears to have decreased over time.

Background

We use Heller and Mershon's definition of party switching as an "umbrella label for any recorded change in party affiliation on the part of a politician holding or competing for elective office"⁹. While the literature on party switching does not necessarily converge on the specific factors that determine party switching, there is a widespread consensus that ambition is a significant factor. Most of the work on party switching can trace its origins back to Schlesinger's seminal work on Ambition

⁶ Barrow, "Party On?", p167.

⁷ Desposato, "Parties for Rent?", p62.

⁸ Heller, William & Mershon, Carol, "Integrating Theoretical and Empirical Models of Party Switching." In, Heller, William & Mershon, Carol, Political Parties and Legislative Party Switching. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p30, 2009.

⁹ Heller & Mershon, "Introduction," p8.

Theory¹⁰. Simply put, “...a politician’s behavior is a response to his office goals. Or, to put it another way, the politician as office-seeker engages in political acts and makes decisions appropriate to gaining office”¹¹. This does not necessarily mean that politicians seek office as an end-in-itself; apart from the prestige associated with the position, access to higher office usually leads to greater influence in policy making. Black (1972) builds on Schlesinger’s analysis and argues that politicians’ decisions vis-à-vis ambition are made “on the fly”. “The average politician can hardly afford to develop elaborate plans concerning his political life. Rather, he probably tends to make decisions on the basis of the costs, benefits, and probabilities that operate at the time of his decision”¹².

Following Heller and Mershon, two assumptions inform our understanding of party switching: Politicians are motivated by ambition, and party switching is a tool which can be used to satisfy that ambition¹³. They seek to hold office because it affords them the ability to achieve goals they could not realize without that office. A change in their partisan affiliation through conscious decisions about how best to realize their individual goals may be a necessary step along that path. The goals may be multifaceted and range from a desire to serve the public, a “drive for power, a vision of ‘good’ public policy, or a profitable career”¹⁴. Party switching can also be understood as a game in which politicians make strategic decisions in order to maximize their opportunities for advancement. In doing so, they seek to maximize their overall utility, which is a function of the expected payoffs of membership in both their current and prospective parties, less the transaction cost incurred through switching (for example, the potential loss of seniority for the purposes of committee assignments in the United States Congress)¹⁵.

Generally speaking, it is reasonable to assume that parties welcome defectors from opposing parties without reservation. Political parties have good reasons to try and attract new members. A minority party in a two-party system which strives to become the majority party, a minority government in a Westminster-style parliament which seeks to become a majority government; and a single party majority government that holds its majority status by a thin margin all have a strong incentive to increase their size. Even when these conditions are not directly applicable, a party which attracts new members from the opposite side of the aisle sends a positive signal to the electorate and its financial base regarding its strength¹⁶.

¹⁰ Schlesinger, Joseph, *Ambition and Politics: Political Careers in the United States*. Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1966.

¹¹ Schlesinger, *Ambition and Politics*, p6.

¹² Black, Gordon, “A Theory of Political Ambition: Career Choices and the Role of Structural Incentives.” In, *American Political Science Review*, volume 66, n°1, p145, 1972

¹³ Heller & Mershon, “Integrating Theoretical and Empirical Models,” p31.

¹⁴ Heller & Mershon, “Integrating Theoretical and Empirical Models,” p33.

¹⁵ Desposato, “Parties for Rent?,” p63.

¹⁶ Yoshinaka, Antoine, “House Party Switchers and Committee Assignments: Who Gets “What, When, How?” In, *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, volume 30, n°3, p392, 2005.

Switching, however, may come with costs to legislators. Grose and Yoshinaka argue that legislators who switch parties in the United States Congress suffer consequences at the ballot box¹⁷. Further, Yoshinaka points to the loss of seniority in the switchers' "destination" party as another potential deterrent¹⁸. Consequently, party leaders have an interest to create incentives for legislators to defect in order to mitigate the transaction costs that accompany switching¹⁹. Desposato further argues that party leaders will offer these benefits to potential switchers when the "benefits of welcoming the new member exceed the costs of resources offered"²⁰. It follows that as the value of a new member goes up, the greater the amount of resources will be offered to the defector.

The final element in the calculus of party switching is party discipline. "Party unity is a collective good for party members... [because it] contributes to voters' ability to distinguish among parties, and it underpins voter confidence in the solidity of platforms"²¹. As such, parties have an incentive to enforce discipline among their ranks by blocking or curtailing dissenting legislators' advancement within the party, preventing access to legislative perks and prestigious assignments, or even revoking access to the party label and defeating prospects for re-election when necessary²². Legislators are thus forced to weigh the benefits of the party label with the costs of toeing the party line, which in turn is compounded by the probability of discipline resulting from dissent. When the costs of the party label outweigh the benefits derived, the logic of switching becomes more compelling.

Individual Motivations

Inter-party movement can also be understood as a consequence of legislators maximizing office and ideological payoffs among a wide range of specific incentives. In effect individual motivations fall into two broad categories: career and ideological incentives.

Career Incentives

McElroy further argues that it is uncontroversial to assume that all politicians prefer holding a higher office to a lower one, and prefer a lower office to no office at all²³. In practice, this means that a legislator will prefer being the leader of a party or serving on a high-profile, powerful committee than being a back-bencher or serving on a

¹⁷ Grose, Christian & Yoshinaka, Antoine. "The Electoral Consequences of Party Switching by Incumbent Members of Congress, 1947-2000." In, *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, volume 28, n°1, p55-75, 2003.

¹⁸ Yoshinaka, "House Party Switchers," p392-3.

¹⁹ Yoshinaka, "House Party Switchers," p392.

²⁰ Desposato, "Parties for Rent?," p64.

²¹ Heller & Mershon, "Integrating Theoretical and Empirical Models," p42.

²² Heller & Mershon, "Integrating Theoretical and Empirical Models," p42.

²³ McElroy, "Intra-Party Politics," p209.

low-ranking one respectively. Drawing examples from the European Parliament, she makes the case that career and office advancements are the key to understanding the movement of Members of the European Parliament (MEP) between party groups and demonstrates that all else being equal, party-leaders, senior members, and members on key committees are less likely to defect than backbench MEPs or those who serve in “low-ranking” committees. Indeed, committee assignments are crucial and are often used as carrots by party leaders.

Similarly, valuable committee assignments are a tasty carrot for legislators in the United States Congress. These assignments are controlled by the party leadership and are often used to reward loyalty and party tenure. Yoshinaka observes,

The textbook account of the committee system states that [congressmen and congresswomen] who are assigned to a committee for the first time (either as a first-year member or by transfer) begin their tenure at the back of the committee queue. As members leave the committee, or Congress altogether, those below the departed member move up the committee ladder.²⁴

But, party leaders have violated this seniority norm to reward individual legislators, including party switchers. Yoshinaka demonstrates that party switchers in House of Representatives are more likely (than non-switchers) to be rewarded with a committee assignment that violates the seniority norm²⁵. This practice of party switchers leapfrogging existing, more senior members of their destination party highlights the institutional incentives created by party leadership to encourage party switching and the high transaction costs associated with switching.

In Brazil, Desposato argues that privileged access to state resources is an important factor in deputies' career considerations²⁶. “Government resources can be channeled into pet projects that provide lucrative construction contracts and needed infrastructure. Cushy jobs in the bureaucracy reward campaign workers and maintain politicians' support networks for the next election. Resources might also be used in less legal ways – for direct campaign activities or even vote buying”²⁷. For legislators, joining the government coalition may maximize access to government funds and resources.

Ideological Incentives

Legislative scholars have a difficult time differentiating between roll-call votes cast by legislators for personal reasons and those cast for partisan reasons. Desposato asks, “are measures of cohesion high because parties enforce discipline, because

²⁴ Yoshinaka, “House Party Switchers,” p393.

²⁵ Yoshinaka, “House Party Switchers,” p393, 295-6.

²⁶ Desposato, “Parties for Rent?”,

²⁷ Desposato, “Parties for Rent?”, p70.

legislators in parties all think alike, or for some other reason? High party cohesion scores alone do not prove the existence of party discipline on votes”²⁸. In this capacity, party switching provides a unique window into this problem. If parties matter little and most votes are cast for personal reasons, legislators who switch parties should vote with their former party just as often as they did before switching. If partisan reasons dominate the calculus of voting, legislators should vote less often with their former party. Desposato finds a clear change in the behavior of legislators who have switched parties in the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies²⁹. Party membership matters, and while it does not in and of itself prove that these deputies switched for ideological reasons, the notion that party membership determines voting patterns confirms the presence of an ideological *incentive* to switch parties. That is, if deputies want to maximize the percentage of votes they cast according to their personal convictions then party membership may be important consideration.

Heller and Mershon support these findings in their own work on the Italian Chamber of Deputies and argue that switching is an expression of the effects of party discipline³⁰. Legislators, stifled by the constraints of party discipline, may reduce its effect by switching parties. Heller and Mershon observe that more disciplined parties experience more switching and those legislators whose ideal points were furthest away from the party’s mean position were most likely to switch. It is important to note that the relationship between party discipline and party switching is expressed through an internal calculation of utility, which in turn is a function of more than simply the number of policies the deputy agrees with. Often, legislators pick their battles and they will toe the party line even if they prefer the status quo less than the alternative. They will do so as long as the total utility gained from remaining exceeds the potential penalty for dissent³¹.

Partisan affiliation is important even in legislatures where party discipline is low. As a consequence of the primary system of candidate selection, party leaders in the United States lack a heavy hand for disciplining rank-and-file legislators. Additionally, given that there are only two political parties in the Congress, each must accommodate a broader diversity of opinion under their legislative tents. Given loose party discipline and relatively broad notions of identification, one might expect legislators to switch often and strategically in order to benefit from association with membership in whatever party enjoys more support at a given time. However, only 38 Senators and 160 Members of Congress have switched

²⁸ Desposato. Scott, “The Impact of Party Switching on Legislative Behaviour in Brazil.” Presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, p3-4, 2003.

²⁹ Desposato, “The Impact of Party Switching,” p9-10.

³⁰ Heller, William & Mershon, Carol, “Dealing in Discipline: Party Switching and Legislative Voting in the Italian Chamber of Deputies, 1988–2000.” In, American Journal of Political Science, volume 52, n°4, p910–11, 2008.

³¹ Heller & Mershon, “Dealing in Discipline,” p913.

parties in 163 years³². Using Data from the 80th to 105th Congress, Nokken finds that Democratic legislators who switch to the Republican Party, and vice versa, start to vote like members of their new party³³.

Given that party switching is ultimately an individual decision (to switch or not to switch), much of the discussion on party switching in the comparative literature focuses on individual preferences, incentives and constraints³⁴. To this end, the extant literature on the individual-level determinants of party switching is nicely summed up by moving Muller and Strøm's policy-office-votes model of party behavior from the party to the individual level of analysis³⁵. In this way, individual legislators are broadly understood to switch parties for policy/ideological reasons (i.e. their individual policy positions are closer to another party than their existing party), for office reasons (they pursue the rewards of office (fame, power, influence etc.) which are not realized in the status quo) or votes, which is to say that they switch parties in order to pursue their continued electoral survival.

Institutional Context of Party Switching

While career and ideological incentives can be seen as the proximal causes of party switching, the broader institutional context in which switching occurs is important to fully understand the phenomenon. Two institutional considerations will be explored: the relative balance of power in a legislature, and the temporal point at which legislators find themselves in the parliamentary cycle.

Relative Balance of Power

Party leaders are rational agents who will offer incentives to potential switchers when the benefits of doing so outweigh the costs of the resources offered³⁶. While the reward for an individual who switches parties may be relatively small, the benefits accrued by the destination party as a whole have the potential to be large.

³² Nokken, Timothy, "Party Switching and the Procedural Party Agenda in the US House of Representatives." In, Heller, William & Mershon, Carol, *Political Parties and Legislative Party Switching*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p81, 2009.

³³ Nokken, Timothy, "Dynamics of Congressional Loyalty: Party Defection and Roll-Call Behavior, 1947-97." In, *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, volume 25, n°3, p418, 2000.

³⁴ Aldrich, *Why Parties?*; Cox, Gary & McCubbins, Matthew, *Setting the Agenda: Responsible Party Government in the U.S. House of Representatives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005; Cox, Gary, *Making Votes Count: Strategic Coordination in the World's Electoral Systems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997; Kam, Christopher, *Party Discipline and Parliamentary Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009; Laver, Michael & Benoit, Kenneth, "The Evolution of Party Systems between Elections." In, *American Journal of Political Science*, volume 47, n°2, p215-33, 2003.

³⁵ Müller, Wolfgang & Strøm, Kaare, *Policy, Office, or Votes? How Political Parties in Western Europe Make Hard Decisions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999; O'Brien, Diana & Shomer, Yael, "A Cross National Analysis of Party Switching." In, *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, volume 38, n°1, p111-41, 2013; Heller & Mershon, "Integrating Theoretical and Empirical Models."

³⁶ Desposato, "Parties for Rent?", p64.

In particular, the change in the legislative balance of power caused by an individual's single defection has the potential may be monumental. Following Kato and Yamamoto, we take note of the distinction between a formal majority (FM) and decisive majority (DM) whereby a FM is a majority which surpasses the usual winning threshold to form government and a DM defines the winning threshold for a party or coalition to control all policy content³⁷. In a majoritarian parliament like the Canadian House of Commons, control of floor majority equals control over government office, which in turn equals control over policy. In this case, the FM and DM are interchangeable. By contrast in Japan's House of Representatives, while an FM is sufficient to control government office, a DM is required to ensure control over all policy decisions³⁸.

This distinction is significant, because a legislator contemplating a switch to a party close to a FM finds herself in a different situation than one who may switch to a party which controls an FM but lacks a DM. "In the presence of rules that make policy control feasible only with a DM, switching takes on an added dynamic - switching to the second-largest party can both deny policy control to the largest party and give the second-largest party the institutional wherewithal to challenge the government"³⁹. This was the case in Japan from 1993 until 2005, a period where the fate of the dominant Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) was significantly affected by party switching. The LDP failed to win an FM in four general elections during that period (1993, 1996, 2000, and 2003). However, and as a result of inter-electoral party switching, LDP gained an FM three times (1997, 2001, and 2003) and a DM once (1999)⁴⁰. In such circumstances the threat of party switching could weigh heavily on the minds of political leaders when deciding their legislative strategy, the content of their policies, and the benefits of attracting new members from the opposition ranks.

Timing and the Parliamentary Cycle

While ambition theory assumes that legislators make rational decisions to pursue their career goals, this view does not necessarily mean that the objectives and goals are static entities. Indeed, the specific goals and incentives relevant to a political career depend a great deal on timing. Mershon and Shvetsova note that timing in the parliamentary cycle alters the menu of incentives on offer to legislators⁴¹. They introduce a five-stage model to describe the incentive structure for party switching faced by legislators as they move from one election to the next. *Affiliation* (Stage A)

³⁷ Kato, Junko & Yamamoto, Kentaro, "Competition for Power: Party Switching and Party System Change in Japan." In, Heller, William & Mershon, Carol, *Political Parties and Legislative Party Switching*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p234, 2009.

³⁸ Kato & Yamamoto, "Competition for Power," p234, 238.

³⁹ Kato & Yamamoto, "Competition for Power," p234.

⁴⁰ Kato & Yamamoto, "Competition for Power," p239.

⁴¹ Mershon, Carol & Shvetsova, Olga, "Timing Matters: Incentives for Party Switching and Stages of Parliamentary Cycles." In, Heller, William & Mershon, Carol, *Political Parties and Legislative Party Switching*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p201-29, 2009.

takes place right after an election when deputies have the opportunity to change or reaffirm their commitment to the party label they held during the election. The authors suggest that during this stage, legislators should be motivated most by the prospect of party perks, and therefore respond to the availability of goods tied to membership. *Benefits* (Stage B) is the stage when these perks, such as seats on prestigious committees, committee chairpersonships, and other legislative posts, are assigned. In parliamentary systems, executive portfolios, perhaps the most sought after perks of all, are allocated at this point. This period should be characterized primarily by legislators' office-seeking behaviour. *Policy Control* (or Stage C) describes the period where the legislative agenda focuses most heavily on policy issues. Instead of a single, continuous Stage C that spans the period between two elections, the authors posit that there is a "non-continuous sequence of shorter phases of concentrated attention to the most important policy domains." *Elections* (Stage E) mark a crucial point in the career of any legislator, and as a precondition for the other stages, electoral motivations and pre-electoral positioning come to the forefront. Finally, *Dormant* (Stage D) is a residual stage that refers to the time periods that do not fall into the other four stages. Little switching should take place during Stage D, as it is be more advantageous for MPs to engage in that behaviour during the other stages⁴².

According to this incentive cycle, office-driven switching should dominate in Stages A and B, as that is the most advantageous time for legislators to move up the ladder. By contrast, policy/ideology-driven switching should predominate in Stage C, and vote-seeking switching should characterize Stage E⁴³.

This classification proposed by Mershon and Shvetsova is a useful, if somewhat restricted, starting point. One of its principal limitations is that it assumes all legislators find themselves at the same stage of the parliamentary cycle as their peers; this is not the case. It is not difficult to imagine why a legislator who knows her time in cabinet is limited would have different incentives and be focused on different goals than her heir apparent. During any stage of the cycle, a legislator who has a chance to join cabinet should find those considerations at the forefront (save perhaps for Stage E if they think their chances of re-election in the first place are slim).

Party Switching in the Canadian House of Commons.

The existing knowledge of the determinants and political consequences of party switching has benefited considerably from a burst of academic activity since 2009 that focuses primarily, but not exclusively, on individual country cases and which explore how unique institutions shape and affect the frequency and variety of party switches. Party switching has been studied in numerous countries including

⁴² Mershon & Shvetsova, "Timing Matters," p203-4.

⁴³ Mershon & Shvetsova, "Timing Matters," p204.

Brazil⁴⁴, Japan⁴⁵, Mexico⁴⁶, Italy⁴⁷, Poland⁴⁸, and the United States⁴⁹. More significantly, the fruits of this labour now extend into the comparative realm and have begun to inform multi-country analyses⁵⁰.

Despite its best intentions, the current swath of research is constrained by the accessibility of reliable data, particularly at the level of analysis of the individual legislator. Consequently, attempts to extend the comparative research program are largely restricted to using aggregate level data on political parties or assemblies as a whole. The absence of individual level data on party switching for both switchers and non-switchers makes the development of causal models of party switching challenging. This is an area where the Canadian case can push the research agenda forward both as a single country case and as a comparative laboratory.

To date, the Canadian case has been largely overlooked by students of comparative party switching. Heller and Mershon include Canada in a table of cross-country frequencies, but their Canadian data is limited to aggregate data for each parliament (eg. percentage of MPs who switched)⁵¹. Mershon's subsequent work with Shvetsova includes Canada as one of nine country cases and employs the population of party switchers (1867-2008) to explain the timing of party switching, but they do not develop a causal model of individual-level party switching itself⁵². O'Brien and Shomer use Canadian party level aggregate data for the period 1994-2007 to inform

⁴⁴ Desposato, "Parties for Rent?"; Desposato, Scott, "Party Switching in Brazil: Causes, Effects and Representation." In, Heller, William & Mershon, Carol, *Political Parties and Legislative Party Switching*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p109-45, 2009; Mainwaring, Scott & Pérez, Linán, "Party Discipline in the Brazilian Constitutional Congress." In, *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, volume 22, n^o4, p453-83, 1997.

⁴⁵ Cox, Gary & Rosenbluth, Frances, "Anatomy of a Split: The Liberal Democrats of Japan." In, *Electoral Studies*, volume 14, n^o4, p355-76, 1995; Kato & Yamamoto, "Competition for Power"; Reed, Steven & Scheiner, Ethan, "Electoral Incentives and Policy Preferences: Mixed Motives Behind Party Defections in Japan." In, *British Journal of Political Science*, volume 33, p469-90, 2003; Nyblade, Benjamin, "Keeping It Together: Party Unity and the 2012 Election." In, Pekkanen, Reed, and Scheiner, *Japan Decides 2012*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

⁴⁶ Kerevel, Yann, "Loyalty and Disloyalty in the Mexican Party System." In, *Latin American Politics and Society*, volume 56, p93-117, 2014.

⁴⁷ Giannetti, Daniela & Laver, Michael, "Party System Dynamics and the Making and Breaking of Italian Governments." In, *Electoral Studies*, volume 20, p529-53, 2001; Mershon, Carol, "Legislative Party Switching and Executive Coalitions." In, *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, volume 9, n^o3, p391-414, 2008.

⁴⁸ Benoit, Kenneth & Hayden, Jacqueline. "Institutional Change and Persistence: The Evolution of Poland's Electoral System, 1989-2001." In, *The Journal of Politics*, volume 66, n^o2, p396-427, 2004.

⁴⁹ Castle, David & Fett, Patrick, "Member Goals and Party Switching in the US Congress." In, Bianco, William, *Congress on Display, Congress at Work*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, p231-42, 2000; Nokken, "Party Switching and the Procedural Party Agenda"; Grose & Yoshinaka, "The Electoral Consequences"; McKee, Seth & Yoshinaka, Antoine, "Late to the Parade: Party Switchers in Contemporary US Southern Legislatures." In, *Party Politics*, volume 20, n^o4, p1-13, 2014.

⁵⁰ Mershon, Carol & Shvetsova, Olga, "The Microfoundations of Party System Stability in Legislatures." In, *The Journal of Politics*, volume 75, p865-78, 2013; O'Brien & Shomer, "A Cross National Analysis."

⁵¹ Heller & Mershon, "Introduction."

⁵² Mershon & Shvetsova, "The Microfoundations."

their model of party and institutional characteristics which facilitate party switching⁵³. It is worth noting that detailed discussion pertaining to Canadian party switching is omitted entirely. Further, and despite inclusion in large cross-national studies, Canada has failed to warrant attention as a single case study, either at the federal or the provincial level of analysis. Indeed, the only published research on Canadian party switching is a short research note in *Canadian Parliamentary Affairs*⁵⁴. Morton provides a valuable but solitary contribution to the study of Canadian party switching which includes a descriptive review of party switching from 1921 until 2005. Like us, he draws his data from the parliamentary library but is less systematic in his definition of inclusion and exclusion. For example, he treats repeat party switchers (i.e. those MPs who switch parties multiple times in a single year) as single observations. He includes those who exit the House of Commons and return at a later date with a different party label as switchers too, something we do not.

At the core of Morton's piece is a view of party switching which stems from a reaction to party discipline. MPs abandon their parties to protest positions adopted or insisted upon by the party leadership. For example, a number of Liberal MPs resigned from their party in protest of the party leadership's failure to abide by its election promise to repeal an unpopular goods and services tax in 1994. The Progressives' unwillingness to enforce party discipline and take on the role of official opposition party in the 1920s ensured that the ensuing vacuum was filled by ambitious MPs who switched to join the governing Liberals ("Liberals in a hurry" as Prime Minister Mackenzie King described them). Otherwise, Morton makes the case that switchers are those MPs "expressing their discontent with party labels they seldom controlled"⁵⁵.

What Morton does not consider are the other motivations that may or may not drive the decision to switch parties. True, elected representatives are an honourable lot, dedicated to a certain set of principles - their own, their party's or those of the constituents who elected them to office. It is unwise, however, to ignore those politicians who are also ambitious and strategic. The decision to switch parties may in part stem from the distance between their preferred individual policy position and that of their party. There is little doubt that this was the case for Joe Commuzzi, an MP expelled from the Liberal Party for supporting a Conservative budget that he believed would deliver tangible benefits to his constituency. For others, it is not always so clear. While the decision to switch parties may originate with policy difference, one cannot ignore those MPs who were promptly appointed to cabinet upon switching. One such MP, David Emerson, was appointed to cabinet shortly after being elected to office under a different party label. This suggests that a view to policy difference as the source of party switching may be limiting on its own and

⁵³ O'Brien & Shomer, "A Cross National Analysis."

⁵⁴ Morton, Desmond, "A Note on Party Switchers." In, *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, volume 29, n°2, p4-8, 2006.

⁵⁵ Morton, "A Note on Party Switchers," p6.

indeed an extension to include ambition and/or survival needs to be included in any consideration of party switching in the Canadian context.

We recognize the contribution made by Morton to the study of Canadian party switching and extend his analysis back further in time to the origins of the modern Canadian state in 1867; we also update the dataset to 2014 using official data provided by the Canadian Library of Parliament. Further, we take a more inclusive approach to party switching and include all party label changes with the impression the motivation to switch once may not be the same to switch a second time (in a single year). For example, the decision to switch out of a party is quite different from the decision by the same MP to switch back into his or her party (perhaps for survival reasons). Relatedly, we are interested in breaking down the qualitative nature of the “switch” by examining whether a MP switches from a governing party to an opposition party, from an opposition party to a governing party or if they make a lateral pass and move from one opposition party to another. In addition to the destination, we are also interested in the timing of party switches. Whether or not a MP decides to switch halfway through the parliamentary term or just before an election provides useful information regarding MP motivations and perhaps the agency of the switch itself.

Descriptive Statistics

From 1867-2014, 340 party switches occurred over 41 parliaments. Since Westminster rules require a parliament to terminate when prime ministers choose to end them (or when governing parties lose the confidence of the legislature and a replacement government cannot be found/constructed), the mean number of party switches per parliament is highly conditioned by the parliaments’ actual duration, which ranges anywhere from less than a year to five years.

Figure 01 here

A cursory look at the topography of party switches over the course of modern Canadian political history (1867-2014) suggests that there is considerable variation with respect to the amount of party switching that takes place over time. But Figure 1 also suggests that there is no discernable pattern to the frequency of party switches: there are peaks in those parliaments anecdotally known for their turmoil (e.g. the split in the Liberal party during the first world war (12th and 13th parliaments) or the raucous uniting of the “right wing” parties in the 37th parliament) and troughs in those parliaments characterized by especially short durations (25th and 31st parliaments).

Figure 02 here

Were we to adopt a “macro” perspective of the party switches and recast our time frame not by parliament but rather by decade as we do in Figure 2, again we can identify tumultuous periods in Canadian political history: the first and second world wars, the fracturing of the party system in the 1920s, the fragmentation of the

Progressive Conservative Party and the emergence of the Bloc Quebecois in the 1990s and the recalibration of the so-called “right” in the 2000s. But nothing in this macro perspective alludes to an identifiable pattern that relates party switching to institutionalization à la Polsby⁵⁶ or Hibbing⁵⁷. At best, one might suggest that as the Canadian state has aged, party switching has increased as well; a moderate and statistically significant positive correlation (Pearson’s $r = .63$) exists between decade and the frequency of party switching. Yet the rules which govern parliamentary life and parliamentary behavior are surprisingly resilient to change; indeed the turnover rate in the House of Commons has always been unusually high⁵⁸.

Figure 03 here

So where to look for clues? We propose turning to the party system. The Canadian party system has been characterized as a “between two and three” party system where Duverger’s Law is inhibited from being fully realized by the peculiarities of Canadian federalism with respect to regional political culture, geographic variation combined with the effects of what are otherwise two-party provincial party systems in a federal context⁵⁹. Regardless of the reason for Duverger’s difficulty with the Canadian party system, the point here is that there is variation in the number of parties which compete in the Canadian system over time. Figure 3 plots the effective number of parties (at the time of the election) in the Canadian House of Commons over the course of the time series (1867-2014). Clearly there is variation and the trend line suggests that the effective number of parties is rising over time. In order to switch parties, MPs must have parties to switch to. True, MPs can switch out of their parties and sit as independents (many do), but to do so runs a high risk of future electoral defeat.ⁱ Rather, we expect that those who are dissatisfied and wish to continue their political career should join another party and as the number of parties rises, so too do the number of choices with respect to destination. Further, more choice means that MPs are not forced to fall in with one’s direct political opponent, as would be the case in an exclusive two party system.ⁱⁱ

Figure 04 here

Of course, not all party switches are created equal. Just as there is variety in the frequency of party switching activity over time, so too we are keenly aware that the

⁵⁶ Polsby, Nelson, “The Institutionalization of the U.S. House of Representatives.” In, *American Political Science Review*, volume 62, p144–68, 1968.

⁵⁷ Hibbing, John, “Legislative Institutionalization with Illustrations from the British House of Commons.” In, *American Journal of Political Science*, volume 32, n°3, p681–712, 1988.

⁵⁸ Matland, Richard & Studlar. Donley, “Determinants of Legislative Turnover: A Cross National Analysis.” In, *British Journal of Political Science*, volume 34, n°1, p87–108, 2004; Kerby, Matthew & Blidook, Kelly, “It’s Not You, It’s Me: Determinants of Voluntary Legislative Turnover in Canada.” In, *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, volume 36, n°4, p621–43, 2011.

⁵⁹ Gaines, B.J., “Does the United Kingdom obey Duverger’s law?” In, Grofman, B., Blais, A., Bowler, S., *Duverger’s Law of Plurality Voting*. New York: Springer, p115–134, 2009.

destination of “switches” varies. For example, one may switch from a government party to an opposition party/independent MP, conversely from an opposition party/independent MP to the government party, or a MP may move horizontally from one opposition party/independent to another opposition party/independent.ⁱⁱⁱ When we take a macro look at party switches and their destinations over the course of the time series we find that 25.89 percent of party switches occur when MPs move from an opposition party to the government party; 18.75 percent of party switch come about when government party MPs move to an opposition party, and the remaining 55.36 percent of party switches take place between opposition parties or independent status. When plotted as a graph over time (Figure 4) we see no evidence to suggest that one trend or another is emerging or ebbing over time; opposition MPs are not flocking to join the governing party or vice versa.

Figure 05 here

In addition to examining the destination of the switch, we also looked at the timing of the switch. In doing so, we asked whether MPs made their switches over the course of the parliament or just prior to an election. Among our population of MPs we found that 40 percent of those party switchers changed their party labels at the time of a general election in order to compete with a new label. The remaining 60 percent changed party labels prior to dissolution. However when we break down the timing of party switching by parliament, an interesting pattern emerges. Figure 5 shows that party switches that take place directly prior to a general election dominate the first half of the time series (parliaments 1-20; 1867-1945). However, from 1945 onwards the trend shifts quite dramatically in favour of party switches that occur between elections. The timing of the transition roughly corresponds with the opening up of the Canadian party system which took place after the First World War when the war-time unity government failed to maintain its cohesion during peacetime. While many of the Liberal Party members who switched to join the Unionist Party (a coalition of Conservative and sympathetic Liberals) in 1917 simply returned to the Liberal fold, the Conservative Party splintered as a result of regional tensions within the party and the absence of a strong leader. Consequently, the once dominant Conservative party was reduced to third party status and the newly emergent Progressive Party won enough seats in the 1921 election to be asked to serve as his majesty’s loyal opposition (an offer they refused). The Progressive’s unwillingness to enforce and ultimately abide by the conventions of traditional party discipline meant that it was only a matter of time before disgruntled members abandoned a party increasingly seen as ineffective.

The real swing towards mid-parliamentary party movement appears to have taken place in the 1960s. A number of switches stem from divisions that existed in the Social Credit Party which saw 12 of its Quebec-based members split and form a new party - the Ralliement des créditists. By the early 1970s the fissure healed and the breakaway faction returned to the fold. However, another trend appears to emerge at this time whereby MPs who leave their parties more commonly exit to sit as independents rather than switch directly into a new party family. In some cases

“independent” status is simply a placeholder before moving onto/into a new party, as it was for those MPs who left the Progressive Conservative Party and eventually went onto the form the Bloc Québécois. For others, sitting as an independent is the endpoint of their party trajectory. In part, the increased frequency of MPs who leave their parties to sit as independents may also reflect an increased tendency for political parties to whip their members and for members to refuse to abide by the whip, while also not wanting to join another party. Consequently, we find a number of MPs whose independent status is qualified by labels such as “Independent Conservative Alliance” or “Independent Liberal”.

Figure 06 here

The trend away from switching at the time of general election does not appear to have benefited party switchers with respect to their electoral success. Indeed 50 percent of party switchers failed to hold on to their seats in the election that followed their switch. But as Figure 6 clearly demonstrates, party switchers have been far less successful electorally since the mid twentieth century; indeed 68 percent of party switchers who ran after 1945 failed to be reelected. The difference is striking when contrasted with the 22 percent of party switchers who failed in their bids in the pre 1945 period. This fact is not lost on the party switchers themselves; the percentage of party switchers who choose not to run in the subsequent election increased from two to nine percent when the pre and post war periods are compared.

Discussion and Review

The preceding analysis provides a first step towards a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of party switching in the Canadian House of Commons, a case that has been largely ignored by those scholars who study intra-election movements. The comprehensive dataset we used consists of the population of party switches. Our analysis of the aggregate data points to a few matters worthy of deeper exploration. With respect to the institutionalization of the Canadian parliament and political system there is evidence that the frequency of party switching is on the rise. The macro causes of this increase need to be fleshed out further, but our glimpse at the variation in the effective number of parties and the relationship between party number and party switching suggests that something may be at play. On one hand, we are tempted by the prospect that MPs may be more enticed when there are a greater number of (effective) parties to choose from, but our eagerness must be tempered by the knowledge that many MPs, at least in the contemporary period, often leave their parties to take up a position as an independent and not as a member of a parliamentary caucus.

We are also intrigued by the obvious and rather dramatic shift in the timing of switches from pre-election party label changes to midsession changes. This phenomenon is largely contemporary and the motivations of individual MPs need to be more clearly identified. Indeed, the cause may have more to do with matters of

agency, which is to say that the increase in mid-session switches may reflect an increase in the willingness of political parties to expel their own members rather than MPs making the active decision to leave. One of the shortcomings, which we must address in future iterations of this work, is the identification of those MPs who jumped and those who were pushed. Relatedly, the results of our initial analysis demand that we look deeper into MP motivations with respect to party switching. MPs who leave their parties clearly have the odds stacked against them with respect to their electoral survival. Given this outcome, the vote and office seeking motivations of switchers needs to be better assessed.

The next stage of this research will involve making full use of the dataset to build a causal model of party switching. This will involve collecting additional institutional variables about the environments in which MPs reside (the legislature and their political parties), personal biographical data on the MPs themselves, and of course more detailed data on the party switches so that we can not only address the issue of agency but also account for more specific types of party switching. A next step will involve addressing the issue of the impact of party switching for individuals MPs and for the political system as a whole. Are MPs better able to attain their goals (getting into cabinet, getting reelected etc.) as a result of switching or is it largely a form of political punishment and ostracization? Relatedly, while one can imagine a House of Commons where too much party switching is unhealthy and damaging, one can also see how a little bit of party switching can serve as a pressure release and a means of preserving party unity in much the same way that individual ministerial responsibility is a device to preserve the integrity of the cabinet. Consequently, we are very interested in exploring the relationship between switching and parliamentary health.

Party switching has tremendous importance for the way in which we conceptualize the role of political parties in modern-day democracies. Parties form the primary linkages between the electorate and their political representatives, serving as both a means to crystalize public debate over important issues and a mechanism of accountability to ensure government is responsive to the governed. In this context it is easy to forget that politicians are rational agents who will act in a manner consistent with their political goals, and as ambition theory suggests, make strategic decisions to maximize their career prospects. Legislators can switch parties on the basis of both career and ideological incentives, such as access to prestigious committee assignments, committee chairpersonships, or even executive portfolios. However, the institutional context for switching changes this incentive structure, and the relative balance of power in a legislature, the timing in the parliamentary cycle are all-important considerations and need to be further operationalized in our model of Canadian party switching.

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Figure 1 Party switches, by parliament

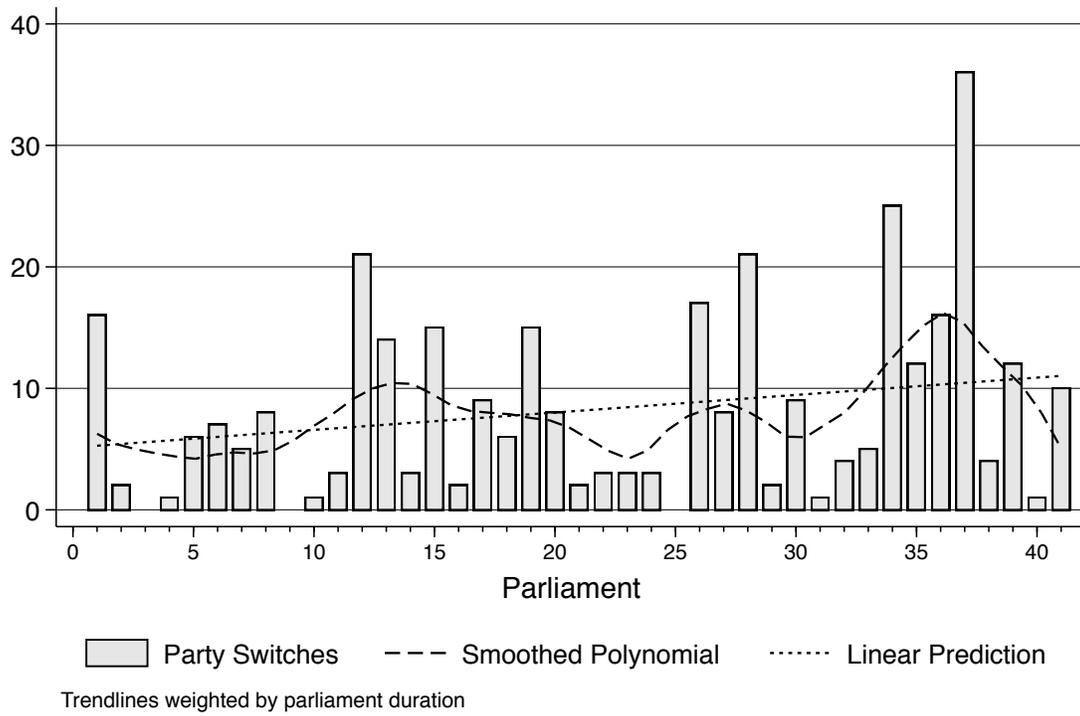


Figure 2 Party switches by decade

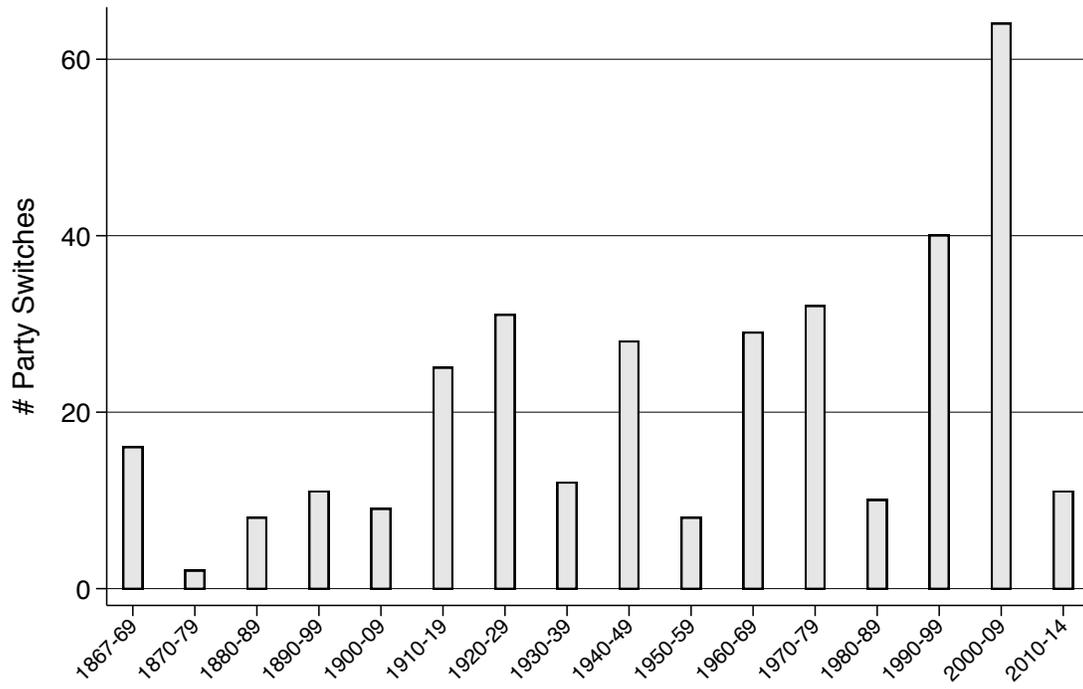


Figure 3 Effective number of parties, by parliament

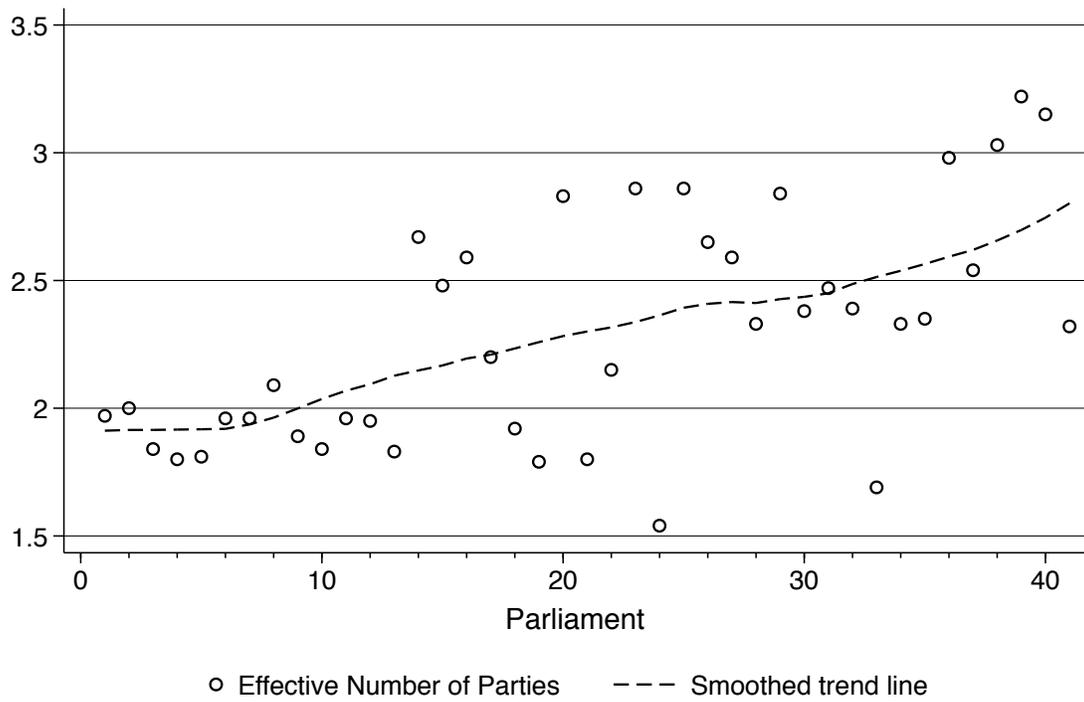


Figure 4 Party switch destination, by parliament

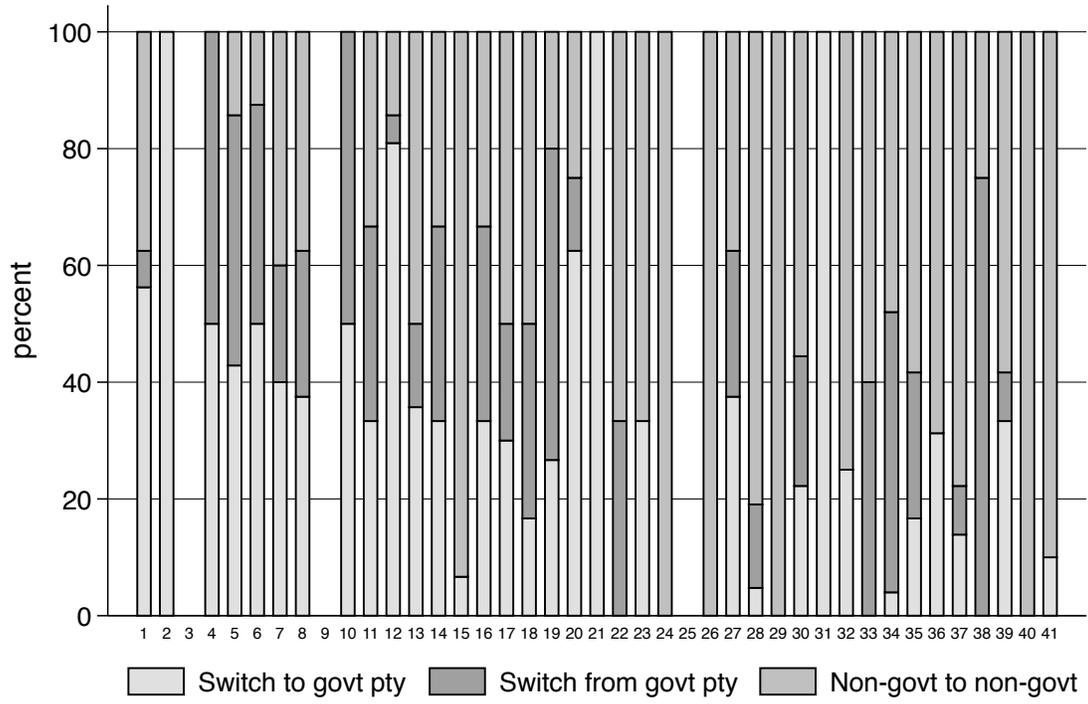


Figure 5 Party switch timing, by parliament

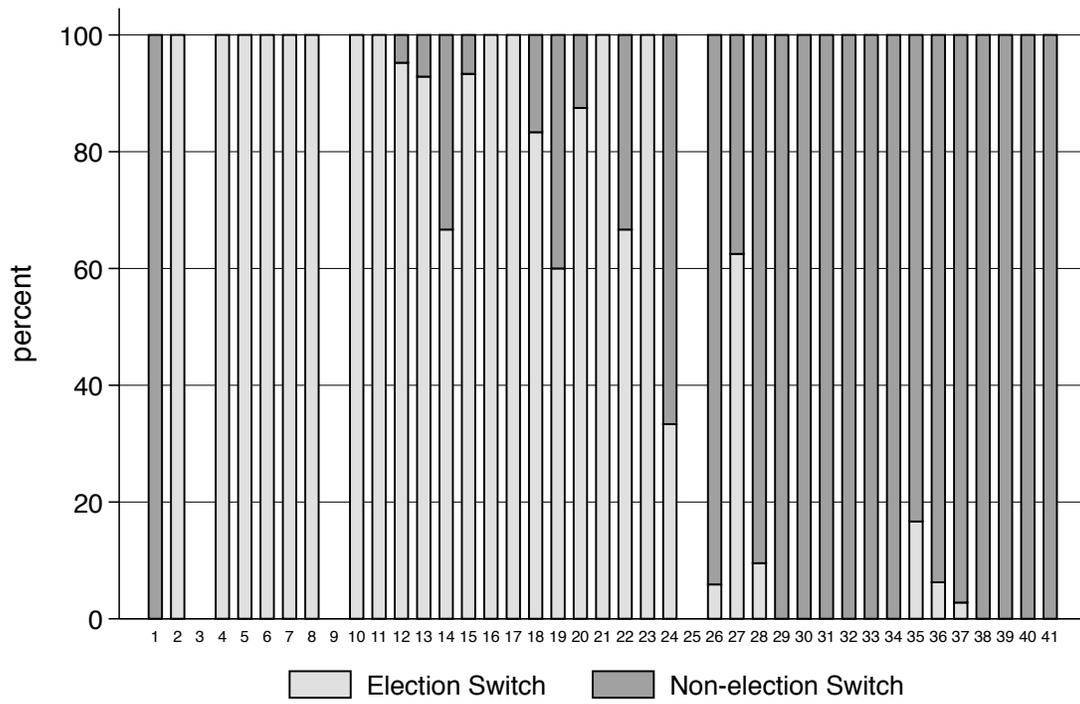
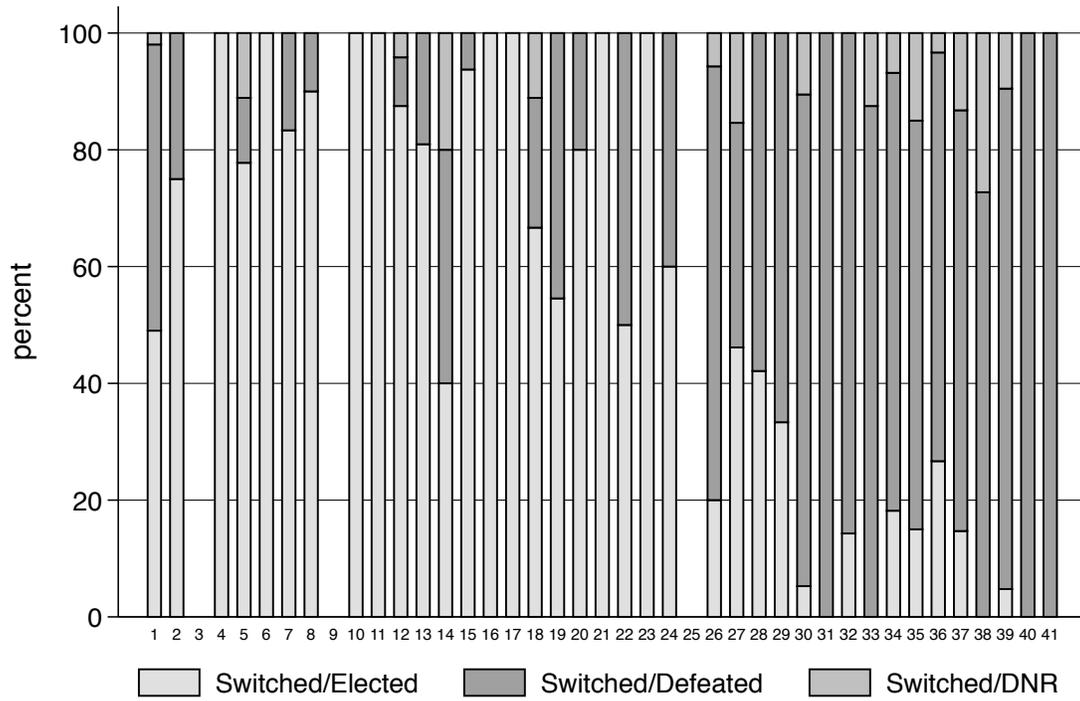


Figure 6 Party switch election outcome, by parliament



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- ⁱ The contemporary Canadian historical political landscape is littered with independents whose incumbency was cut short by electors whose attachment to political parties are stronger than the ties to individual representatives. Since 1968 only 21 percent of incumbents who ran as independents were successfully reelected; 43 percent were defeated and 33 percent chose not to run at all.
- ⁱⁱ And yet, when we calculate the correlation coefficient between effective number of parties and the frequency of party switching we find only a weak positive (albeit statistically significant) correlation exists (Pearson's $r = 0.02$).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Some MPs have redefined their independent label such that they move from independent to independent liberal/conservative etc. and vice versa.