Introduction

When Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia reached the U.S. Senate in 1959, Democrats supported high levels of defense spending and favored tax cuts to stimulate the economy, even at the risk of deficits. Byrd's party was deeply divided over matters of race and on balance less supportive of civil rights than the Republicans. Democrats also retained an inclination toward freer trade that dated back to the antebellum period. Although party positions were evident on these and other topics, issues that now polarize the parties like abortion and gun control were not on the political agenda.

Five decades later Byrd remains in the Senate and very much a Democrat. Yet in many other respects the identities of the two parties have changed radically. By the latter part of Byrd's tenure, his party was associated with opposition to high levels of defense spending, willingness to raise taxes to balance the budget, and support for civil rights. Support for freer trade had become a Republican cause. Meanwhile, new issues, including abortion and gun control, had arisen and become increasingly partisan.

These shifts occurred over decades during which many politicians came and went. None of the senators with whom Byrd served in 1959 remain in office. Thus many reasonably assume that elite replacement must underlie the changes in party policies that have occurred. Yet this view is largely mistaken. To a great extent, adaptation at the microlevel of individuals has driven change at the macrolevel of parties. Senator Byrd himself has not survived without adapting. Although often seen as an independent-minded relic of a bygone age, close study reveals that on

issue after issue, as his party changed, Byrd did as well. In this respect he was typical of leading politicians in both parties.

In this book I seek to explain why and how such changes occur. The dynamics of party position change are well worth exploring. Some may simply be interested in why it is that Democrats and Republicans shifted positions on a particular issue. Many readers may be surprised to learn how recent parties' associations with issue positions that now seem central to their identity really are. More broadly, students of politics may seek to understand what logic underlies the ever-changing combinations of policies the parties offer voters.

Beyond its intrinsic interest, even gaining a better understanding of party position change is important for those chiefly concerned with other aspects of politics. Parties' relative positions on issues as well as their absolute ones influence voter choice. This is even true to an extent when candidates break from their party; voters use parties' issue reputations to infer individual candidates' stands. For students of public opinion, party positioning on issues also matters a great deal. Given the well-documented tendency of voters to adopt stands espoused by their party's leaders, shifts in parties' positioning also affect public opinion.

The chapters that follow include much historical detail, many simple quantitative analyses, and extensive engagement both with previous scholarship on the phenomenon of party position change generally and with prior studies of the development of particular issues. Yet amid all this complexity, four simple claims, each of which contrasts in important ways with prevailing theories, emerge in this book.

First, the best way to understand the dynamics of party position change is to model parties as coalitions of groups with intense preferences on particular issues managed by politicians. This understanding is not the only possible view of parties; they have also been seen as groupings of individuals united by shared values, or, rather more plausibly, as entities designed to serve candidates and officeholders. The coalitional view I develop inclines us to expect different dynamics of party position change in issue areas in which groups are prominent compared to those in which they are weak or absent. Similarly, this view implies that development of parties' positioning will differ notably, depending on whether groups are focused on an issue.

Second, I show that parties' repositioning on policies, be it a polarization on a previously cross-cutting issue or a reversal of the parties' previous relative positions, occurs chiefly via adaptation on the part of incumbents. Conversion or "flip-flopping" is pervasive both among

politicians who seek positions of national leadership and among more obscure members of Congress as well. It drives party position change. This means that even in an era of incumbency advantage and low turnover in Congress parties can realign on issues rapidly.

Third, since parties' positions on issues change over time while very few politicians change parties, a reinterpretation of the stability in the "spatial" positions of members of Congress revealed by various roll-call scaling or "ideal point" estimation techniques is in order. This stability in the spatial positioning of legislators has often been attributed to their reputational concerns; fear of being branded an unreliable flip-flopper is said to inhibit position changing.

Yet, as I show, the only way a politician can maintain a reputation as a loyal Democrat or Republican over time is by adopting the new party line when it changes. I demonstrate that the most successful politicians in both parties have repeatedly demonstrated this sort of flexibility. Seen this way, flip-flopping is the key to ideological consistency and party loyalty; the stability in politicians' spatial positions is a result of perpetual adaptation on particular issues. This understanding casts a new light on studies focused on "polarization," emphasizing that the ideological poles themselves have changed greatly over time. What it meant to be a liberal in 1963 was different in several ways from what it implied in 1983, and such changes cannot be usefully understood by viewing politics in a unidimensional way. In some cases parties took up entirely new issues. In other cases they traded places, with each party taking up the side of the argument they had previously opposed. These changes occurred while the relative positions of two major parties remained stable in many other issue areas.

Finally, building on my coalitional view of parties, I develop models that explain variation in the process of party position change along several dimensions. There is much variation to explain. Some party position changes are rapid while others are gradual. Some party positions are durable while others are reversed repeatedly. Although conversion or "flip-flopping" by leading politicians is always a key mechanism producing party position change, its importance varies across issues as well. In some cases the role of adaptation by existing elites is overwhelming, yet in other instances conversion combines with elite turnover to reposition parties on issues.

Although this process may appear messy, an understanding of parties as coalitions of groups with intense preferences managed by office-seeking politicians reveals an underlying logic. Identifying the impetus for a party position change enables us to predict its speed, its durability,

and the extent to which it occurs via adaptation by existing elites or their replacement by new ones. Politicians' electoral concerns underlie their actions in all cases, but the development of parties' positions on issues will vary systematically depending on the impetus for change.

In some cases elected officials react to new preferences expressed by long-standing party coalition components. If keeping old friends requires new policies, most politicians are happy to oblige. When a party elite is responding to new demands by an existing coalition, component change is rapid and occurs primarily through adaptation or position switching by incumbents. The new position should be stable since the party coalition component will compel party leaders to maintain it.

Yet politicians are also proactive, recruiting new components to their coalitions and experimenting with policies that are not important for narrow groups but may attract broad-based support for their party and themselves. Change stemming from politicians' incorporation of a new group in their coalition will be more gradual. Some elected officials will adapt in order to stay in the good graces of the new entrant into their party's coalition.

However, elite replacement also plays an important role in such cases because entrenched incumbents can often win reelection without courting new groups. By contrast, the next generation of aspirants to office within a party will have a strong incentive to adopt stances popular with party-linked groups. So there is more inertia in parties' stands in these cases.

Such inertia also exists at the mass level. Voters' party identification and the initial deference of many incumbents to local opinion mean that new groups' entry into party coalitions and the related reorientation of parties' issue positions is a gradual process. Yet once a group is ensconced in a party the new position should be stable.

Finally, in some cases party politicians experiment with new positions that they hope will prove broadly popular, but that are not of special concern to a particular group of voters and activists. Since such changes are not dependent on the movement of voters into party coalitions they can be rapid and will occur chiefly via adaptation among incumbents rather than elite replacement. Yet because these positions are not anchored by components of parties' coalitions, they are apt to prove unstable over time.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

The book proceeds as follows. In Chapter 1, after examining existing work on party position change, which is mostly found in the "realignment" and

"issue evolution" literatures, I define key terms and lay out my perspective on party position change, stressing a view of parties as coalitions of groups with intense preferences on different issues in a multidimensional political setting. I also discuss issues of measurement.

In the subsequent chapters I present three different models of change and examine several issues in light of them. In Chapter 2 I focus on the process of coalition maintenance via a case study of the evolution of party positions on trade policy. Chapter 3 includes elaboration of coalition group incorporation with close studies of the parties' polarization on the issues of abortion and gun control. I also more briefly discuss other issues that this model may illuminate, including support for private schools and tort reform.

In Chapter 4 I focus on the case of civil rights or racial politics. This case, so important in the literature and American politics, is worthy of special attention. It is also distinctive in that key aspects of its development are captured by both the coalition maintenance and group incorporation models I present in previous chapters. I briefly note that this was also true of other issues including women's rights.

In Chapter 5 I explore two "groupless" issues: defense spending and fiscal policy. In both cases parties adopted stands trying to expand their support, but not targeting or incorporating an organized group that would subsequently constrain them. As a result, both issues developed in a different manner from cases in which parties are appeasing allies or incorporating new groups. I note that some other issues, including support for the space program, also seem to fit in this category. In Chapter 6 I conclude with a summary of my findings, discussion of their implications, and review of directions for future study.

1

Explaining Party Position Change

Theory and Method

> The Right Honourable Gentleman caught the Whigs bathing and walked away with their clothes. He has left them in the full enjoyment of their liberal position, and he is himself a strict conservative of their garments.
>
> Benjamin Disraeli on Lord Peel's support for the repeal of the Corn Laws, speech in the House of Commons, 1845

In this book I seek to explain party position change in American politics. Although every issue is unique, my contention is that we can generalize about the process of parties' development of positions to a great extent. Close inspection reveals that similar dynamics are evident in very different issue areas. The argument I make is about the interaction of parties, issues, and groups. It is also focused on parties' *relative* positions on issues. All these terms can be used in different ways for diverse purposes. So before proceeding to an elaboration of theory, cases, and evidence, I define the key concepts I employ. I also explain my focus on parties' *relative* positions on issues.

WHAT IS A PARTY?

American political parties are notoriously poorly bounded institutions. Unlike parties in most democracies, they have no formal membership. Party registration exists only in some states and is managed by state governments. The parties themselves do not admit and expel members, unlike any true membership organization.

As a result of these fuzzy boundaries, scholars have long disagreed over basic questions such as "what is a party?" and "who runs parties?" Two pioneering students of American parties, V. O. Key and

E. E. Schattschneider, differed over whether voters, even those who supported a party's candidates, registered under its name, and voted in its primaries, could usefully be seen as part of the party. Key (1958, 181) wrote of the "party in the electorate" referring to "groups who regard themselves as party members," yet Schattschneider (1942, 53) insisted that "whatever else the parties may be, they are not associations of the voters who support the party candidates."

For purposes of this book I define parties as coalitions of groups with intense preferences on issues managed by politicians. This may not seem like a controversial view, but other conceptions of parties have been quite prominent in the scholarly literature. Influential accounts model modern American parties as groupings dominated by candidates (Downs 1957; Schlesinger 1991) motivated by the desire for office.

Scholars have not always looked at parties from the candidate perspective. They have often acknowledged – sometimes ruefully – the importance of party activists who do not seek office for themselves and are motivated by policy concerns. Wilson (1962) and Wildavsky (1965) are two early studies in this vein. A recent example is Bawn et al. (2006).

Some scholars have combined these perspectives. In an influential study Aldrich (1995) offers a primarily candidate-centered account but makes room for the role of policy-oriented activists, especially in recent decades when patronage has declined as a motivation for party work.

The view of parties as coalitions of groups with intense preferences on particular policies managed by politicians that I develop has certain advantages. Unlike models of parties as "top-down" candidate-dominated institutions or "bottom-up" groupings controlled by activists with broad ideological concerns, it leads us to expect different dynamics of party position change on issues in which parties incorporate groups with intense preferences in contrast to those evident in policy areas in which such groups are largely absent. I show that the autonomy of party politicians varies systematically across issues depending on the composition of their coalitions.

Although my focus is on group–party interaction, I recognize that some voters support a party without identifying with any component group and others are active in it because they are attracted to its platform across a range of issues. A successful party will attract many such people, and they are worthy of study. They are not, however, my focus in this book because I contend that they are seldom the source of party position change. Specific policy reorientations usually have specific causes and focused advocates. It is precisely the intense focus of these groups that gives them power and compels politicians to be responsive to them.

In this book I also largely ignore the formal structure of committees that is an important part of the textbook party, agreeing with Schlesinger (1984, 379) that in the case of American parties, "the formal structure is obviously not the real organization." Although the formal party organizations play an important role in campaigns, they do not determine the policy positions of elected officials that define the party in the minds of voters and that are my focus here.

WHAT IS AN ISSUE?

It seems clear enough what a roll call is and who is an MC (member of Congress). With a bit more controversy we can define parties as well. Yet delineating "issues" is less straightforward. The conception of "issue" that I employ is broader than some and narrower than others. For purposes of this book, issues are distinct areas of public policy characterized by ongoing controversy.

American political history is replete with issues, the contours of which were agreed on even by individuals who differed greatly on policy. In earlier eras observers tended to speak of "questions": "The Tariff Question," "The Negro Question," and "The Liquor Question" are a few of the most prominent examples. My delineation of issues is based on my understanding of how political actors perceived them at the time.

I focus on durable policy controversies, not disputes over procedure or institutional prerogatives: for example, the filibuster, "judicial activism," "federalism," "independent counsels," or "executive privilege." Richard Piper (1997) shows that parties are quite opportunistic and inconsistent in these matters. Where they stand depends on where they sit at the moment. Thus I do not explore such cases because they do not speak to this book's core theoretical concerns about how partisan coalitions and issue alignments develop.

Instead, I focus on the relative positions of the two parties in controversial policy areas. My cases are trade, abortion, gun control, race, national defense, and fiscal policy. I examine these issues both because of their importance in American politics in the last five decades and because of their prominence in the existing literature, which fails to capture important aspects of their development. Since this is a study of long-term change, I explore parties' basic orientations in policy areas, not on episodic controversies within them. Thus I examine the parties' stands on defense spending, not the MX missile or the B-2 bomber, and trade policy, not the Smoot-Hawley tariff or NAFTA. Although I focus on six

issue areas, in each chapter I discuss other examples of party position change that seem to be marked by the same dynamics as the cases under examination.

WHAT ARE GROUPS?

I argue that parties' changing positions on issues can usually be attributed to shifts in preferences among groups already in their coalition or party elites' attempts to attract a new group to their side. It is important, then, to clarify what I mean by "group." I distinguish between groups and organizations. A group is a self-aware collection of individuals who share intense concerns about a particular policy area. Such a group may support numerous organizations, without being reducible to any one of them.

For example, the "religious right" is a group that has been prominent in American politics since the late 1970s, during which time organizations such as the Moral Majority, the Christian Coalition, and Focus on the Family have waxed and waned. Similarly, the labor movement has been aligned with the Democratic Party since the New Deal, while the AFL competed against and then merged with the upstart CIO, and several unions have entered and left the resulting federation. Such organizations may also be active outside of politics – as unions, firms, and churches all are – but need not be – for example, the League of Conservation Voters.

Party leaders adopt policies that appeal to groups because they believe that doing so, rather than taking stands consistent with the majority preferences revealed by polling, will produce the most electoral benefits. Organizations within groups also control resources such as funds and activist networks that can aid parties in campaigns. In an era in which patronage armies are no more, the resources groups can mobilize as party "subcontractors" (Skinner 2007, 9) are prized by candidates.[1] Yet it is wrong to view these entities as mere business partners whom politicians can easily contract and disengage. Over time groups become entrenched components of party coalitions and influence critical decisions such as the nomination of candidates. Most of the time politicians take the group composition of their party as largely fixed and adapt themselves to it.

[1] Not all groups are equally partisan in their orientation. Groups that are in conflict with other groups over policy rather than merely seeking distributive benefits at public expense are most likely to be drawn into parties (Hansen 1991).

WHY DO PARTIES' RELATIVE POSITIONS MATTER?

In this book I seek to explain changes in the parties' relative positions on issues, rather than the emergence of specific or absolute policy stands. In this sense there are several possible changes to explain. An issue may emerge from obscurity. A topic that has cut across party lines may come to separate the two camps. A formerly divisive issue can disappear. Most dramatically, the parties may "trade places," as the Democrats adopt a position once associated with Republicans and the GOP takes up a traditionally Democratic theme.

An effort to understand parties' changing issue positioning might seem more intuitively approached by asking why Democratic or Republican leaders adopted specific or absolute stands rather than relative positions, and many scholars have indeed explored such questions. Why did Nixon turn to wage and price controls (Matusow 1998)? Why did the Clinton administration embrace "managed competition" as the centerpiece of its ill-fated health care plan (Hacker 1997)?

Yet as important as explaining the precise policies enacted and advocated is, the relative positions of parties matter greatly as well.[2] Politicians do not adopt stances in a vacuum. They care greatly about where a stand situates them vis-à-vis the other party. They have reason to do so. Major research programs in political science suggest that the parties' relative positions on issues have important consequences. These traditions, however, are more focused on the results of party positions than their causes.

In the tradition of "spatial modeling" associated with Downs (1957) and his many heirs, voters support the party closest to them on issues. Parties' relative proximity to voters is key, not their absolute distance from them. In some variants the parties' absolute distance matters as well, because a party may suffer from abstentions if it moves too far away from "its" voters. Yet even in this case the parties' relative positions still matter.

One limitation of the spatial approach is that the substantive meaning of the ideological continuum is generally taken for granted. Yet the

[2] There is no necessary connection between movement of the debate on an issue and change in the parties' relative positions. For example, when the Cold War ended both parties favored reduced defense budgets, but Republicans remained relatively more supportive of military spending than Democrats. Parties can also move in the same direction at different rates, altering their relative positions. Rochon (1998, 88) notes that when the GOP became the more conservative party on race in the 1960s it was still more supportive of racial equality in an absolute sense than either party had been for most of U.S. history.