Party System Change in Legislatures Worldwide

In this book, Carol Mershon and Olga Shvetsova explore one of the central questions in democratic politics: how much autonomy do elected politicians have to shape and reshape the party system on their own, without the direct involvement of voters in elections? Mershon and Shvetsova’s theory focuses on the choices of party membership made by legislators while serving in office. It identifies the inducements and impediments to legislators’ changes of partisan affiliation and integrates strategic and institutional approaches to the study of parties and party systems. With empirical analyses comparing nine countries that differ in electoral laws, territorial governance, and executive–legislative relations, Mershon and Shvetsova find that strategic incumbents have the capacity to reconfigure the party system as established in elections. Representatives are motivated to bring about change by opportunities arising during the parliamentary term. They are deterred from doing so by the elemental democratic practice of elections.

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Preface

Party systems bring structure out of chaos. They start with the infinite diversity of the concerns, interests, and conflicts inherent in an electorate and then somehow internalize and alleviate that complexity, boiling it down to a manageable number of policy issues and a manageable menu of policy alternatives. This is delicate work. Its outcome hinges on what exactly is happening with parties and the party system – what they look like and how they evolve. Simply put, if a party system “goes wrong,” not only might policies start to go awry but the democratic consensus itself might erode and, with it, the social fabric might fray. Precisely because parties do so much to lead us on policy, set the agenda, and define our options, the question of where parties come from and how they change has long been central in politics.

In Party System Change in Legislatures Worldwide, we argue that people who make politics their profession and who strive to meet their professional goals – just as anyone with a career would do – have a hand in adjusting what a party system becomes. How free are the hands of professional politicians in altering party systems? Should we worry that incumbents might override voters, or should we be relieved? The latter is a thorny normative question that we leave for others to consider. What we address here are the theoretical and empirical questions: why do we see shifts in parliamentary parties, and what are the forces that rein in this potential for change? We establish as a fact that parliamentary incumbents can and, under certain circumstances, do effect change in parliamentary party systems and that their behavior can be traced and is to an extent predictable. Their impact on policies can be and occasionally is immensely significant.

This is not a new analytical angle. Everyone agrees that politicians broker politics. Call it elite conspiracy or call it political leadership, but political incumbents are not merely deputized to do the work of government in their constituents’ stead. They bring value added and are collectively capable of accomplishing what
a direct plebiscite would never be able to reach: some measure of consensus on a reasonably broad range of concerns. This is why we value representative democracy even though we at times supplant it with our right to referenda. There might well be many venues in which political incumbents exercise their autonomy. Amending the party system, relative to what voters and election rules generate with each round of parliamentary elections, is but one.

Even though we all know that politicians broker politics, the capacity of officeholders to alter parties and party systems without the direct involvement of the electorate is an understudied phenomenon. Yet it is vitally important to democratic governance. The very fact of such autonomy also sheds light on the enduring question of party system origins. The book explores this capacity as it descends all the way down to individual members of parliament, discovering that their party affiliations are by no means fixed, and following how those affiliations change as incumbents walk the corridors of power. As *Party System Change in Legislatures Worldwide* shows, when representatives shift partisanship, decision making in legislatures and the options for future elections shift as well.

While the choices of voters create a party system in the electoral arena, the choices of strategic legislative incumbents outside that arena, between elections, can reshape the contours of a party system. Sitting legislators introduce change when doing so can benefit them in parliament. The basic democratic rule that citizens have the right to choose their representatives in repeated elections lends a measure of stability to parliamentary party systems between elections. The reality of recurring elections, in which voters might punish representatives who abandon their original electoral party label, places a limit on change in parliamentary party systems.
We wish to express our gratitude to the many individuals who have helped make this book possible. For their ongoing, extremely valuable input and support, we are indebted to Mikhail Filippov, Will Heller, Brian Humes, Michael McDonald, and Norman Schofield. A special word of thanks goes to Scott Mainwaring, who graciously shared his data on electoral volatility; he bears no responsibility for the analyses here or our interpretation of them.

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