PART I

1

Legislative Party Switching in the United States: An Introduction

> I am Joe Sestak, the Democrat.
>
> – Campaign ad in the 2010 Pennsylvania Democratic primary for U.S. Senate[1]

On April 28, 2009, U.S. Senator Arlen Specter announced that he was leaving the Republican Party and seeking reelection as a Democrat. His decision, coupled with the adjudication of the 2008 senatorial election in Minnesota in favor of comedian-turned-politician Al Franken, meant that Democrats would, for the first time in more than thirty years, have the sixty votes required by Senate Rule XXII to invoke cloture and thwart Republican filibusters.[2] Specter's switch gave rise to a predictable torrent of reactions. The news "thrilled" President Obama, as he vowed to give the senior senator from Pennsylvania his "full support."[3] Many Democratic senators and other party bigwigs, such as Pennsylvania Governor Ed Rendell, immediately embraced Specter. The positive reception from the Democratic Party brass was met with equally intense scorn from the Republicans. Republican National Committee chair Michael Steele, for instance, accused Specter of "put[ting] his loyalty to his own political career above his duty to his state and nation,"[4] while Senator John Cornyn, the chair of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, accused Specter of "political self-preservation."[5]

[1] "The Switch," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x97DdZho11k [accessed July 9, 2010].
[2] This filibuster-proof majority (including the votes of two Democratic-leaning independents) lasted until the election of Scott Brown (R-MA) in 2010.
[3] Jonathan Martin, "Obama Gives Specter 'Full Support'," *Politico*, April 28, 2009, http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0409/21800.html [accessed July 6, 2009].
[4] Andy Barr, "Steele to GOP: Unleash Specter Fury," *Politico*, April 29, 2009, http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0409/21864.html [accessed July 7, 2009].
[5] Associated Press, "Quotes on Specter's Switch to the Democratic Party," *Associated Press State and Local Wire*, April 28, 2009.

According to a press release issued by Specter's office, ideology was a key factor behind his decision, with his "political philosophy more in line with Democrats than Republicans."[6] And, according to news reports, Specter realized he was in danger of losing the upcoming Republican primary in 2010.[7] A poll taken shortly before the switch showed the five-term senator trailing conservative stalwart Pat Toomey by more than twenty points (Rasmussen Reports 2009); six years earlier, Toomey had come within two percentage points of defeating Specter. It appeared, in early 2009 at least, that Specter would stand a better chance of getting reelected were he to avoid the Republican primary and instead run as a Democrat.

Specter's decision came after weeks of prodding not only from Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, but also from Vice President Joe Biden. The two longtime colleagues often rode the train back to their respective states together, and the vice president now saw a great opportunity to bring Democrats closer to the sixty-vote mark in the Senate while striking a blow to the image of the Republican Party as a mainly conservative, southern party anathema to a "reasonable" moderate such as Specter. There was thus a concerted effort on the part of many Democratic high-ranking officials to attract Specter to their side of the aisle.

Once the decision was announced, however, Specter's transition to the Democratic Party proved to be anything but smooth. First, some senior members of the Democratic caucus were reluctant to be leapfrogged in terms of seniority. As a result, Specter initially had to give up his years of seniority accumulated as a Republican. Aware that a complete loss of seniority might hurt Specter at home or, even worse, deter him from switching sides, the Democratic leadership orchestrated a move that would install Specter as chair of a subcommittee of the Judiciary Committee. His seniority would also be revisited in the 112th Congress, provided Pennsylvania voters were to return him to Washington in 2010.

Second, the reaction back home in Pennsylvania and among activists was lukewarm, to say the least. While Governor Rendell welcomed Specter into the Democratic fold, other Democrats were not so enthusiastic at the idea of supporting a man who had been on the "wrong" side of many issues. Just a few days after the switch, for instance, the liberal group MoveOn.org circulated an online video highly critical of Specter.[8] Among those who adopted the "wait-and-see" approach was second-term Democratic representative and former Navy officer Joe Sestak, who decided to mount a primary challenge despite

[6] Associated Press, "Statement by Sen. Specter About His Party Switch," *Associated Press State and Local Wire*, April 28, 2009.

[7] Carl Hulse and Adam Nagourney, "Obama Welcomes Specter to the Party," *New York Times*, April 29, 2009.

[8] Michael Falcone, "MoveOn Moves Against Specter," *Politico*, May 8, 2009, http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0509/22276.html [accessed July 7, 2009].

being told that the Democratic leadership would support Specter's nomination. As Sestak launched a tour of the state, he made reference to Specter's party switch – and lack of credibility as a Democrat – as the reason why he was running for the Senate seat: "This isn't something I wanted to do four months ago, but it has to be done.... Someone has to be in this race that's credible."[9] Sestak also brought up the issues of trust and consistency by accusing Specter of "[switching] parties and vot[ing] as he will, depending on political winds."[10] The issue of trust was also raised by Pat Toomey, who asked rhetorically, "The problem, and the question I think Democrats and voters in Pennsylvania have is, can they trust this man?"[11] Worried that a bruising primary might hurt the party's chances in the fall, the White House even dispatched Bill Clinton to convince Sestak to drop out of the race, but to no avail. Sestak ran a series of damning ads, including one in which he called himself the "real Democrat" in the race (see epigraph). In the end, Specter was not able to overcome Sestak's challenge, and he went down in defeat 54 percent to 46 percent in the Democratic primary.

Just two weeks later, another congressional party switcher failed to secure the nomination in his new party's primary: Parker Griffith, a Democrat-turned-Republican House member from Alabama lost to Mo Brooks, a county commissioner and former state legislator. While Griffith claimed not to regret his switch, he conceded that "it may have been, politically, a mistake."[12] In the span of less than a month, then, the careers of the two incumbents who switched parties during the 111th Congress were halted by lesser-known primary opponents.

In this book, I argue that there is a lot we can learn from the decision by some legislators – such as Arlen Specter and Parker Griffith – to switch parties, while other legislators who may be tempted to switch remain loyal to their party. Specifically, I answer two questions: why do some legislators change party affiliation, and what consequences does party switching entail? Drawing on evidence – both quantitative and qualitative – from the U.S. Congress and state legislatures, the book provides the first in-depth, systematic look at party switching in the United States. I offer a novel ambition-based theory of party switching and identify the factors that may give some legislators the impetus to

[9] Lynn Olanoff, "Rep. Joe Sestak Claims He Is the True Democrat, Not U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter," *Lehigh Valley Live*, July 5, 2009, http://www.lehighvalleylive.com/elections/index.ssf/2009/07/expresstimes_photo_joe_gillrep.html [accessed July 6, 2009].

[10] Beth Brelje, "Joe Sestak, a Democrat, Joins Race Against Specter," *Pocono Record*, July 6, 2009, http://www.poconorecord.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20090706/NEWS/907060313/-1/NEWS01 [accessed July 6, 2009].

[11] Andy Barr, "Republicans Rip Specter," *Politico*, April 28, 2009, http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0409/21808.html [accessed July 7, 2009].

[12] Jaywon Choe, "Parker Griffith Says He Doesn't Regret Switching Parties," *CBS News*, June 3, 2010, http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-20006768-503544.html [accessed June 6, 2010].

switch parties, the electoral and institutional consequences of party switching, and the role of party leaders and other members in fostering party switching. The fundamental decision by elites to affiliate with a party – and change that affiliation once in office – is the subject of my study, which is long overdue given the career-defining quality of such a decision.

My Argument

A snapshot of Congress or state legislatures would show that almost all legislators affiliate with one of the two major parties. Moreover, most politicians remain affiliated with the same party throughout their careers. In some instances, however, legislators have "crossed the aisle" and changed party affiliation. From a theoretical standpoint, a puzzle emerges: why does party switching occur so rarely? What is it about an initial affiliation that makes it difficult for sitting politicians to switch sides? The argument I advance in the book is that changing party affiliation is costly, and that these costs are significant enough to deter most politicians from ever switching parties. Aware of these costs, party leaders attempt to lower them to attract members from the other side, while simultaneously trying to prevent their co-partisans from switching sides. Some legislators may overcome these costs when their ambitions are best served by switching parties. Thus, political ambition will play a central role in this study of party switching.

If we were to sample the news stories that followed recent party switches, we would likely come up with the following "unique" or "idiosyncratic" narratives: Joe Biden was the key in bringing Specter into the Democratic fold; U.S. Senator Jim Jeffords left the Republican Party in 2001 only after the White House refused to renew the northeastern dairy compact, a vital federal subsidy in his home state of Vermont;[13] or perhaps he felt slighted when the White House failed to invite him to a ceremony awarding the "National Teacher of the Year" title to a Vermont schoolteacher.[14] Going back to the 1980s, the circumstances surrounding then-Representative Phil Gramm's switch from Democrat to Republican were very much unique: after Democrats discovered that the Texas representative had been secretly holding meetings with Reagan's OMB director, David Stockman, Gramm was stripped of his assignment on the Budget Committee, which led him into the open arms of the GOP.

As political scientists, however, our challenge is to take these seemingly disparate and unique cases and explain them systematically and in a theoretically informed way. For if our theoretical understanding of political decision making is to be worth its salt, we must be able to offer a theoretically compelling

[13] Julie Hirschfeld and Suzanne Dougherty, "Spilled Milk in Vermont," *CQ Weekly*, May 26, 2001, pp. 1247–8.
[14] Mike Christensen, "Anguished Transformation from Maverick to Outcast," *CQ Weekly*, May 26, 2001, pp. 1242–6.

argument pertaining to who switches parties, the conditions that are conducive to party switching, why party switching does not occur more frequently in the United States, and what consequences party switching entails. In short, we should be able to offer some systematic insight into what is arguably the most significant decision a legislator will ever make. This is the task I set out to accomplish with this book. If an entire subfield can be devoted to understanding party affiliation choice among the mass public (that is, party identification), surely one cannot dismiss the analogous choice made by elites, simply because party switching by incumbent politicians does not occur more frequently.

Thus, I strongly reject the view that the decision to switch parties is idiosyncratic or that it does not lend itself to a study that employs the tools of modern social science. And it is my contention that party switching merits scholarly attention because of its implications for the functioning of institutions, representation, and democracy. When a politician switches parties, there is much more involved in that decision than simply replacing the capital letter that follows that politician's name. There are various considerations – normative, theoretical, and empirical – that make a study of party switching in the United States long overdue, something to which I return later in this chapter.

From a social scientist's perspective, what is striking about the events surrounding Arlen Specter's party switch is that they are reminiscent of those surrounding the defections of other members of Congress (MCs). The reactions, both at home and in Washington; the institutional ramifications of the switch; the ways in which the switch is explained – none of what took place along these various dimensions is without precedent. My findings will show that there are causes of and consequences to party switching that manifest themselves time and again, and that those commonalities across disparate cases speak to larger theoretical issues pertaining to institutions, elections, and representation. This is by no means an inductive endeavor. In this book, I propose a novel ambition-based theory of party switching from which I derive hypotheses that I put to the test with empirical data. My aim is to further our theoretical understanding of elite decision making by focusing on one very important decision, namely the decision to switch party affiliation.

Scope of the Book

While gaining a better understanding of the phenomenon of legislative party switching is the proximate goal of this book, studying party switching is not only interesting for its own sake; rather, it allows for related questions to be examined. For instance, what is the role of parties and party labels in the electoral arena? How readily can congressional norms be infringed? What are the effects of politicians' goals on their behavior? How important are politicians' personal relationships in their decision-making process? These sorts of questions are of interest to an audience broader than that specifically interested in party switching by U.S. legislators. This book therefore uses the occurrence of

a relatively uncommon phenomenon to address other questions of interest to political scientists. The evidence I bring to the fore suggests that legislators consider several questions before deciding to defect: What are the possible effects of switching parties? How will constituents react? Will they be able to trust their representative? How will friends and supporters respond? What effect will switching parties have on committee assignments? If politicians do not ignore these important considerations when deciding whether to switch parties, neither should political scientists when studying that decision. By uncovering systematic patterns across many cases, this book furthers our theoretical understanding of elite decision making via a thorough examination of party switching by U.S. legislators.

This book also challenges some of the conventional wisdom regarding party switching, which is incomplete at best or in some cases simply wrong. Let us examine, for instance, the claim that ideological "fit" between individual legislators and their party is a driving force behind party switching. While it is certainly true that most party switchers are ideologically at odds with their party and that they believe the other party to be a better fit, *in itself* this does not provide a satisfying explanation. If ideological fit is the main impetus for switching parties, how do we explain the vast majority of ideological misfits who do not switch parties? What is it about a lack of ideological fit that leads a legislator to switch parties? What is the causal mechanism? For every switcher who claims, like Ronald Reagan did in the 1960s, that "I didn't leave the [Democratic] party, the [Democratic] party left me," there are many more nonswitchers who may find that their party has "left them" to some extent, but who do not respond by leaving the party. Often couched in terms of ideological "fit," it is my contention that switching parties entails more than simply moving from one ideologically ill-fitting suit to a more comfortably tailored outfit. Without giving away too much at this stage, my argument is that political ambition provides a causal mechanism that explains the observed relationship between ideology and party switching.

Another example of how this book challenges the conventional wisdom pertains to the electoral dimensions of party switching. It has been argued, for instance, that legislators such as Arlen Specter base their decision to switch parties primarily on electoral calculations (e.g., Evans, Peterson, and Hadley 2012). While it may be received wisdom that switching parties provides a benefit at the polls, I argue the opposite: party switching exacts considerable electoral costs, which explains why so few legislators switch sides. In general, the benefits of switching parties do *not* manifest themselves in terms of reelection. As I show later in the book, the benefits may be incurred inside the institution or perhaps when running for a *different* electoral office than the one currently held. In this sense (and likely of interest to students of elite behavior generally), switching parties may not narrowly adhere to Mayhew's (1974, 5) theoretical assumption of legislators as "single-minded seekers of *re*election" (emphasis mine). This book, therefore, challenges some empirical

and theoretical received wisdom. By focusing on a decision as fundamental as choosing a party affiliation, I show that elite behavior does not always conform to the narrow reelection incentive, which raises serious questions about the major theoretical assumption that underpins much of the contemporary congressional literature.[15]

In the rest of this chapter, I provide a definition of party switchers and demonstrate the importance – both in the United States and around the world – of party switching on a theoretical level as well as in the real world of everyday politics. I then provide a brief chapter-by-chapter overview of the rest of the book.

Party Switching: A Definition

Identifying legislators who switched parties seems simple, and in some ways it is, especially at the congressional level in recent years. However, some legislators' party affiliation is not straightforward to determine – and hence whether they are considered "party switchers" is more debatable. At one extreme, we could adopt Epstein's (1981) definition of a political party and classify any legislator who takes on more than one party *label* during the course of his or her legislative career as a party switcher. This most inclusive strategy is employed by King (1988) and, to a large extent, by Nokken and Poole (2004).[16] Oppenheimer (2000) and Hatcher and Oppenheimer (2003) apply a more stringent criterion of a *meaningful* party switch, which excludes "label shoppers, those who change labels but maintain organization and seniority, and those whose ballot label changes but who encounter the same partisan opposition" (Hatcher and Oppenheimer 2003, 3). While these fine-grained distinctions can be of significance, they are not as relevant in the period under study in this book, because cases of party switching in the last half-century or so are relatively easy to identify regardless of the definition used.

Yet to be consistent I must define the behavior under study. I adopt a two-pronged definition of party switchers in this book. First, I start with all MCs who have been elected to or have served in one chamber under more than one party label from 1950 to 2014. Second, I exclude from this list those MCs who were first elected using a nominal party label and immediately caucused

[15] Of course, Mayhew's reelection assumption has been challenged before by scholars who argue that other goals such as power and policy explain elite behavior in a way that reelection alone cannot (e.g., Fenno 1973). Mayhew himself recognizes that progressive ambition, rather than reelection, may drive some elite behavior (Mayhew 1974, 75–6). What sets this book apart, however, is not only that the decision to affiliate with a party or another is a fundamental one for elected officials (as opposed to, say, committee assignment requests), but that it might actually be detrimental to an incumbent's reelection goal. If the dominant theoretical framework cannot account for party switching, then we need a better theoretical explanation for it, which I provide in this book.

[16] Nokken and Poole's strategy is somewhat less inclusive as they do not classify as party switchers members of Congress who changed party labels but formally remained affiliated with the same party.

with and obtained committee assignments from one of the two major parties. This second stage eliminates "pseudo-switchers" such as Representative Joe Moakley (D-MA) or Senator James L. Buckley from New York. Appendix A lists the names of excluded pseudo-switchers and the reason for their exclusion.[17]

There are a few things to note regarding my definition of party switchers. First, because the relevant time frame is the congressional career (or in Chapter 4, the state legislative career), it excludes MCs (state legislators) who switched parties prior to their election to Congress (the state legislature). Second, my definition also excludes MCs who served in Congress under one party label and changed party affiliation after leaving office. These types of party switchers fall outside the scope of this research, which focuses on legislators who served under more than one party label in the same chamber. Third, I am specifically interested in *legislative* party switching. This does not encompass the universe of politicians who change party affiliation while in office – far from it. Party switching among statewide elected officials, local politicians, or judicial incumbents, for instance, falls outside the scope of this book. However, the domain of my theoretical framework is not limited to the legislative arena; in fact, future research should attempt to gauge whether the propositions I enunciate can be generalized to other institutional settings (something that I touch upon in Chapter 4 and to which I return in the final chapter).

Table 1.1 lists the thirty-three congressional party switchers who met these criteria between 1950 and 2014. A cursory look at this table shows that southern MCs are overrepresented, which should come as no surprise since the South has undergone a massive realignment of partisan forces since the 1960s. At the national level, the relatively small number of cases of congressional party switchers raises the question: is party switching worthy of a scholarly study such as this one? As I argue in the next section, party switching by legislators is relevant theoretically as well as in practical terms, a view increasingly shared by students of U.S. politics as well as comparative scholars.

It is also worth mentioning that the universe of elected officials who have affiliated with more than one party is much larger than that. At the state and local levels, for instance, hundreds if not thousands of politicians have switched parties in the last few decades. In the South alone, more than 250 legislators switched parties from 1980 to 2009 (Yoshinaka 2012). Several years ago, the GOP published a list of more than 350 elected officials across the country who switched from Democrat to Republican during the Clinton administration.[18]

[17] Some might argue that senators Joe Lieberman and Harry Byrd, Jr. belong in that category as well. Given my definition, however, they are considered party switchers. In any case, I reestimated all the analyses in the book without Lieberman and Byrd, and the results remained largely unchanged (results available on request).

[18] The list, which circulated on the Internet in the early 2000s, can now be found on an (admittedly biased) conservative website (http://alamo-girl.com/0432.htm, accessed February 24, 2015). The figure reported is consistent with another figure, from the *New York Times*, indicating more than 130 Democratic officeholders who switched parties in the three years following Clinton's