Escaping collective responsibility in fluid party systems: Evidence from South Korea

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ABSTRACT

How does the public evaluate politicians' reactions to crises that damage their party's image? Using an experimental survey design and the 2016 South Korean political scandal, we explore which strategies allow politicians to avoid electoral accountability for corruption in their party. The scandal prompted some politicians from the president's party to participate in protests calling for her impeachment, make statements criticizing her leadership, or join a new splinter party. We find that all of these strategies both increase electoral support and decrease perceptions of corruption. However, leaving the party is the least successful at increasing electability and politicians are more likely to gain votes if instead they take a clear position against corrupt politicians. Our findings have implications for accountability in weakly institutionalized party systems, where politicians, faced with a party brand crisis, have incentives to switch parties to escape electoral consequences, as opposed to reforming the party from within.

1. Introduction

In response to political crises that threaten the image of their parties, politicians often engage in a range of behaviors to distance themselves from the party and mitigate electoral consequences they may personally face at the ballot box. What types of actions allow them to do so most effectively? This paper draws on Hirschman (1970)'s seminal concepts of exit, voice, and loyalty to examine which strategy – leaving the party or trying to fix the problem within the party – is perceived as being more responsive to the electorate. Using an experimental survey design, we explore this question in the context of the 2016 political scandal in South Korea surrounding former President Park Geun-hye, which has generated heterogeneous responses from the ruling Saenuri Party (New Frontier Party; SP) politicians. In the aftermath of the scandal, some SP politicians voiced their concerns by participating in anti-Park protests and/or making statements that criticized Park, while others left the SP and created a new party called the Bareun Party. The remaining SP members decided to change the party name to Liberty Korea Party to dissociate themselves from Park's corruption scandal.

In post-transition South Korea (1987-present), political parties and party leaders hold inconsistent and often contradictory policy positions given the impediments to party development under military rule (1961–1988) and bigger role played by civil society (and lesser role played by the opposition parties) during the democratic transition process (Wong, 2015). Whenever these parties foresaw or experienced an electoral setback, they responded with party merges, splits, and name changes to create a new image and secure new voters.

While scholars have documented the volatility of the party system in South Korea (e.g., Wong, 2015; Choi, 2012), to our knowledge, no study has actually examined the public perceptions of such strategies at the micro level. If these tactics offer an effective way for politicians to distance themselves from a party with a deteriorating brand and preserve personal reputation, then arguably voters might be providing incentives for politicians to pursue strategies that further weaken the party system. We contrast the exit strategy with two other ways of distancing oneself from a party engulfed in a corruption scandal without leaving the party organization – taking a clear public stance against implicated politicians and joining mass protests. We find that all of these strategies are effective in both increasing electoral support and decreasing perceptions of corruption. However, leaving the party is the least successful strategy at increasing electoral support and politicians are more likely to gain votes if instead they speak out against those found guilty of corruption.

This paper contributes to several strands of literature. First, we contribute to the growing literature on corruption and political scandals and provide evidence that party switching and taking a public stance can help politicians distance themselves from the scandal and increase

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their electability. Furthermore, while research on party systems and democratic consolidation has focused primarily on politicians' opportunistic behavior in explaining low institutionalization of party systems in the post-transition period, our findings illustrate that public perceptions of politicians' behavior, if translated into voting behavior, may actually reward political strategies that would contribute to weak parties and unstable partisan identities in new democracies. Lastly, existing work does not tell us much about how voters evaluate politicians' involvement in public protest, which is common in times of crisis and upheaval at both national and local levels. Our findings suggest that voters perceive politicians' legislative and non-legislative behavior differently, and analyzing attitudes towards extra-institutional strategies can help us better understand political communication between politicians and their electorates, especially in moments of political crises that polarize the public.

2. Literature

The performance of a party organization is subject to deterioration due to various structural and random factors, including corruption. There are two options as "mechanisms of recuperation," which are exit and voice (Hirschman, 1970). In the context of a party organization, for individual politicians, the exit option is to quit the party and the voice option is to publicly express one's dissatisfaction with the party leadership (Kato, 1998).

Party labels (or brand names) – the "actions, beliefs, and outcomes commonly attributed to the party as a whole" (Cox and McCubbins, 1993, p. 102) – have electoral value for voters as they solve the collective action problem of information (Aldrich, 2011) by providing low-cost cues about politicians associated with the party (e.g., Snyder and Ting, 2002, 2003; Geys and Vermeir, 2014). Moreover, voters use party membership when estimating the 'quality' of politicians (Jones and Hudson, 1998). However, party brands can be a double-edged sword for politicians since "all members automatically enjoy (or suffer) a party's reputation or performance in government" (Desposato, 2006, p. 64). Political crises such as scandals taking place at the national level can not only impact political careers of the implicated politicians, but also those who belong to the party involved in a scandal, including local politicians (Daniele et al., 2017). When individual electoral interests of politicians diverge from those of their party – for instance, when a scandal within the party threatens to negatively affect politicians' personal reputations – they have incentives to weaken or break their association with the party.

It is well established in the literature that voters punish incumbent politicians who engage in corruption (e.g., Besley, 2006; Ashworth, 2012), but that this relationship is complicated by the attribution and clarity of responsibility – the extent to which those who are responsible can be identified (e.g., Powell and Whitten, 1993; Powell, 2000). If politicians can credibly weaken the link between themselves and actors implicated in corruption, facilitating attribution of responsibility, they will be less likely to suffer electoral punishment (Winters and Weitz-Shapiro, 2016). Politicians, motivated to avoid blame, can use a number of different strategies, including "blame managment" through excuses and justifications (McGraw, 1990, 1991; McGraw et al., 1995), passing the blame or deflecting it by supporting a politically popular alternative (Weaver, 1986), which could be a new political party (see Section 2.1) or a mass mobilization (see Section 2.2).

2.1. The electoral consequences of party switching (exit)

In countries with weakly institutionalized party systems in Asia, Latin America, and post-communist Europe, politicians frequently switch political parties either by forming new parties or moving to a different existing party. Desposato (2006) shows that in Brazil, where party switching is very common, legislators use membership in parties to maximize pork, ideological consistency, and short-term electoral

success. Lupu (2013) finds that when parties converge – making party brands less distinguishable – partisan attachment weakens as a result. Similarly, party switching, if pervasive, can effectively render party labels meaningless.

This party fluidity, especially in new democracies, contributes to electoral volatility and undermines voters' ability to use party labels to effectively hold governments accountable for policy outcomes. Focusing on the case of Poland, Zielinski et al. (2005) show that for politicians whose party becomes associated with poor economic performance, switching parties is electorally beneficial, allowing them to escape electoral accountability and "hide behind the collective reputation of their new party" (p. 390). Fragmentation of the party system impedes the clarity of responsibility, which in turn shapes both the incentive for politicians to engage in corruption and voters' ability to punish corrupt politicians (Tavits, 2007). This is because it "complicates for voters the task of attributing responsibility for corruption" and makes it harder to coordinate to "employ electoral choice effectively to oust corrupt incumbents" (Schleiter and Voznaya, 2016, p. 1). Therefore, politicians in weakly institutionalized party systems can likely avoid collective responsibility for corruption in their party by switching parties, but in doing so, are likely to further destabilize the party system.

In contrast, consolidated party systems have institutionalized parties that "provide a stable means for channeling the interests of social groups and a mechanism for citizens to hold government accountable" (Hicken and Kuhonta, 2015, p. 1). Exit is not an easily available strategy in highly institutionalized party systems because the costs of new party formation are higher and voters have stronger partisan identities. However, in those contexts, politicians can still engage in voice strategies we detail below in order to distance themselves from the implicated party leader or corrupt fellow party members.

2.2. The electoral consequences of scandals and distancing (voice)

Research shows that blame avoidance strategies by political parties and policy makers are widely used and take various forms (Giger and Nelson, 2011; Kang and Reich, 2014; Wenzelburger, 2014), and suggests that they are effective in mitigating voter backlash. Using cross-national evidence from Latin America, Lee (2014) argues that in presidential systems, president's party can strategically distance itself from an unpopular president and minimize its electoral losses by refusing to cooperate with the president's legislative agenda. Similarly, studies on the United States Congress show that when parties lack formal institutional power, legislators use strategic communications outside of Congress such as public statements to build public support (Grimmer, 2013; Groeling, 2010; Sellers, 2010). Groeling (2010) finds that the public is relatively more influenced by partisan messages made by politicians from their party, as well as when the opposition party praises the president or the president's party criticizes him. In this context, speaking against one's interest enhances personal reputation even at the expense of weakening the overall party brand.

Another form of exercising voice is through protest participation, a less conventional form of communication for politicians than a public statement. The classic social movement theory operationalizes protest as citizens making claims on the state (Tilly et al., 2001; Tarrow, 2011). Traditionally understood as "weapons of the weak" (Scott, 1983), protests constitute a public, time consuming, and risky act of political participation (Verba et al., 1995; Schussman and Soule, 2005). In this dichotomy and in treating the state as a unitary actor, this approach overlooks the possibility of those occupying positions within the state joining the mass mobilization to express their discontent with other members of the establishment.[1] Yet "parties and movements are

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[1] There are a few notable exceptions such as Radnitz (2010)'s study of elite-led mobilization in Central Asia.