Electoral Studies

Changing votes or changing voters? How candidates and election context swing voters and mobilize the base☆

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A B S T R A C T

To win elections, candidates attempt to mobilize supporters and persuade swing voters. With what magnitude each operates across American elections is not clear. I argue that the influence of swing voters should depend upon change in the candidates across elections and that the consequences of changes in composition should depend upon the relative balance of campaign expenditures. I estimate a Bayesian hierarchical model on Florida electoral data for house, governor, and senate contests. Swing voters contribute on average 4.1 percentage points to change in party vote shares, while change in turnout influences outcomes by 8.6 points. The effect of swing voters is increasing in the divergence between the Democrat and Republican candidates. Candidates increasingly benefit from the votes of occasional voters as the relative balance of campaign spending increases in their favor. More broadly, the effects of swing voters and turnout are not constant features of American elections, instead varying across time and space in ways related to candidates and context.

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In American elections, campaigns aim to increase their chances of victory by mobilizing supporters to turn out and by persuading swing voters to their side. Candidates and parties spend billions of dollars on campaign activities toward these goals, and victorious parties assert mandates to implement the policies they advocated during their campaign. How parties gain or lose votes across elections has important implications not only for the direction of policy change after the election, but for our understanding of how voters make choices and hold politicians accountable to their interests and how campaigns allocate scarce resources. More broadly, if congressional elections are increasingly nationalized and the candidates polarized, it may be that persuasion becomes a less viable strategy relative to mobilization. Do parties and candidates win more often by persuading swing voters, or by better mobilizing their supporters?

Despite the importance of these questions, we lack basic empirical and theoretical understanding of when swing voters or mobilization are of larger or lesser influence on partisan outcomes. While scholars at least as far back as Key (1966) have investigated the question, determining the relative contribution of swing voters and changes in turnout to aggregate electoral change is not trivial. Because of the secret ballot, it is difficult to observe the actual voting behavior of individual voters in even one election, let alone across elections. While opinion surveys offer the opportunity to ask citizens whether and for whom they voted in one or more elections, sample sizes are small, memories are fallible, and various biases plague opinion survey reports of turnout and vote choice. Thus, the individual behavioral processes underlying change in party vote shares across elections in the United States is not well understood.

In this article, I explore the likely sources of electoral change using standard political science models of voting. Electoral change may follow from many citizens participating in both elections and changing their votes from one party to the other (what I call *switchers* following Key, 1966). But electoral change may also occur due to changes in the sizes and vote choices of the set of eligible citizens who participate in only one of the two elections (what I call *change in composition*). Applying political science models to contests across two elections suggests that swing voters should be increasingly important in contest pairs where the two sets of candidates are less similar. With respect to change in composition, standard models suggest change in the relative campaign resources expended should influence the effects of change in composition on

party vote shares.

To explore these theoretical implications and measure the relative effects of switchers and changes in composition, I estimate a Bayesian hierarchical model on novel data to estimate the contribution of these two factors to electoral change. I implement this method in the state of Florida from 2006 to 2010 for gubernatorial, presidential, U.S. Senate, and U.S. House contests. I merge individual records of turnout from statewide voter files to precinct-level election returns to estimate the contributions of both switching and composition to electoral change. I use a hierarchical model to estimate in each precinct the number of switching voters and the number of voters for each party who participate in only one election or the other. The turnout data from the voter file serve as predictors for these counts. The method respects the observed vote counts in every precinct in each election, allowing me to aggregate across precincts to the level of the contest and describe electoral change in whole.

I find that voters who participated in both elections switched between the parties for an average net effect of about 4.1 percentage points across the contests I analyze. I estimate an average net effect of change in composition of 8.6 percentage points, though the effect is notably higher in contest comparisons between 2008 and 2010 than between 2006 and 2010. Both effect sizes vary across contests, and I show that the effect of switching voters increases with the dissimilarity of candidates in the two elections. I also find that change in the balance of Republican campaign spending across contests predicts the size of the advantage for the Republican candidates from change in the composition of the electorate. Finally, my results confirm that the old adage that "increased turnout benefits the Democrats" is not safe to assume.

This article makes three contributions to the study of elections, electoral change, and turnout. First, I apply standard models of voting behavior across two elections to understand electoral change. I find that three traditional schools of political science, the Michigan, Columbia, and Rochester schools, all suggest similar predictions for when we should see more or less switching between the parties. I also apply the three models plus more recent findings on the effects of get-out-the-vote activities to develop hypotheses about when changes in composition should benefit each party across two elections. Second, I present a framework and hierarchical statistical model to estimate directly the factors of electoral change using election-wide administrative data not subject to survey biases or small samples. Third, I test the theoretical implications empirically, showing that there are no universal effects of turnout or switching voters. Rather, these effects are contingent on candidate and campaign context in predictable ways.

The essay proceeds first by presenting previous work on switching voters and the partisan consequences of changes in composition, then exploring theoretical implications for electoral change across two elections through individual level behavioral choices. I continue by describing a Bayesian hierarchical model to estimate the quantities of the behavioral choices from aggregated precinct-level data, and estimate that model on Florida election data. I present contest-level results and their relationship to candidates and context, and offer concluding remarks.

1. Estimates of the factors of electoral change

A great variety of scholarship has separately considered the phenomena of swing (or switching) voters and the partisan implications of turnout. Less research has considered the two factors of electoral change together in a unified framework. The limited attention to the combined and relative effects of switchers and change in composition of the electorate is likely due to difficulties in data. These limitations have not changed dramatically in the half century since V.O. Key wrote,

> Election statistics can tell us nothing about the movements of voters to and fro across party lines; they give only a net measure of changes in the party division from election to election. To trace changes or identify continuities in voter sentiment over time one must employ some variant of the survey sample (Key, 1966, p. 11).

The survey sample has been used widely. For example, Campbell (1960) shows that peripheral voters surge in support of a favored candidate in one election but do not show up at the next, leaving only the core voters participating at the second election and changing the party vote. Shively (1992) uses panel surveys to validate his aggregate analysis, presenting net effects of switching voters of 7.7 and 10.7 percent of vote share, and net effects of "differential abstention" of −0.3 and 3.0 percent, 1956 to 1960 and 1972 to 1976. Lupia (2010) uses self-reported recall of 2004 vote in the 2008 ANES to show that one quarter of those who voted for Republican George W. Bush in the 2004 presidential election failed to vote for the Republican John McCain in 2008, either because they stayed home (7 percent), voted for the Democrat Barack Obama (15 percent), or voted for another candidate (1 percent). These efforts with survey data indicate that swing voters are a larger contributor to electoral change than changes in composition.

Despite Key's admonition about electoral data, and perhaps because he shows only pages later the problems of over-reported vote for the winning candidate in the previous election (Key, 1966, Table 2.1, p. 14), scholars have turned to aggregate electoral data to understand the nature of electoral change. DeNardo (1980) shows with a sample of congressional district elections from seven states and six elections that increasing turnout favors the majority party, but with variation by the level of turnout and across time. Shively (1982) uses nationwide presidential vote totals to show that the partisan margin from stable voters was a much larger contributor to election results than the partisan shifts of unstable voters from 1888 to 1980. Shively (1992) shows that conversion has become increasingly relevant in presidential, congressional, and state legislative elections since the 1960s. Ansolabehere and Stewart, III (2010) use precinct-level observations from Massachusetts to draw inferences about change from presidential vote in 2008 to a special election in 2010.

Theory and evidence on when switching and composition should be of larger or smaller effect is underdeveloped. Even a basic definition of *swing voters* is unsettled, with most research measuring switching behavior based on responses to a single cross-sectional survey. Swing voters have been alternatively identified by cross-pressured group memberships (Berelson et al., 1954), self-reported independent partisan identification (Campbell et al., 1960), self-reported recall of different party presidential vote (Key, 1966; Lupia, 2010), self-reported ticket-splitting (De Vries and Tarrance, 1972), balance in affective evaluation of the two competing candidates (Kelley, 1983; Mayer, 2007), conflicts between voter issue preferences and the issue positions of the parties or candidates (Campbell et al., 1960; Hillygus and Shields, 2008), indifference between the parties' economic policy platforms (e.g. Krasa and Polborn, 2014; Persson and Tabellini, 2000), or by traits relevant to a psychological model of persuasion such as information and media exposure (Converse, 1962; Zaller, 2004). Because of different definitions of swing and a lack of cross-time measurements, consensus on who the swing/switching voters are or how