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Explaining Party Switching in an Institutionalised Party System: The Case of South Africa

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Institutionalised party systems are said to foster stronger party allegiances and fewer switches. However, this expectation is called into question when we observe the case of South Africa. Despite being characterised by a highly institutionalised dominant party system as well as party-centred electoral and candidate selection rules, South Africa has experienced frequent episodes of floor-crossing over time. This article advances an analytical framework that links elites' vote-seeking and office-seeking incentives to party switching and party system functioning. It posits that as elites strive for (re)selection and (re-)election, they will depart from smaller to larger parties, and this ultimately reinforces the party system of the day. Utilising an original dataset of 5,230 candidates to the National Assembly and the provincial legislatures of South Africa between 1999 and 2019, the study charts the overall rate of party switching and tests hypotheses postulating the effect of party size and candidates' electoral marginality on the likelihood of switching parties. The analyses reveal that candidates from smaller parties and those who failed to be (re-)elected by the narrowest margin are more likely to switch parties in the next election. Additionally, most candidates who switched parties tended to move to parties that fared better than their original party in the next election; and they switched from parties that either did worse or stayed the same. But we did not find a strong correlation linking party performance to switches. The study highlights the role of intra-party competition in patterns of elite migration and reveals the importance of linking elite behaviour to party system functioning.

Keywords: institutionalised party systems; party switching; candidates; electoral marginality; party size; South Africa

Introduction

Party switching is part of everyday politics in any type of regime, but according to numerous studies, it tends to be more intense in new democracies and less institutionalised party

systems as it is here that the ties between politicians, their parties and the voters are weaker.¹ This study argues, however, that the apparent stasis that seems to characterise highly institutionalised party systems can mask relatively high levels of party switching. The case of South Africa is illustrative. The country's proportional representation electoral system, centralised candidate selection rules and highly institutionalised dominant-party (HIDP) system should, in theory, strengthen party allegiances and discourage defections. Yet episodes of party switching have been recurrent and benefited the country's sole governing party, the African National Congress (ANC), since the advent of democracy in 1994.² So, what factors explain party switching?

Party switching can be motivated by multiple factors that vary across contexts. Institutions such as the electoral system, and politicians' ideological identity, policy preferences and career ambitions often determine the decision to stay or leave.³ Whereas ideological and policy issues tend to be more influential in switching in established democracies, vote-seeking and office-seeking motives tend to matter more in new democracies.⁴ This is, at least in part, explained by the weaker role that social and ideological cleavages have played in the formation of political parties in new democracies, particularly in Africa.⁵ As a result, this article advances an analytical framework that links elites' vote-seeking and office-seeking incentives to party switching and party system functioning. It posits that political elites will depart to larger parties as they strive for (re)selection and (re-)election, and this ultimately reinforces the party system of the day.

South Africa is an interesting case study as party switching is common despite the unfavourable institutional setting. Furthermore, and as briefly discussed later, South Africa seems more prone to politicians switching parties than other HIDP systems in southern Africa since it has stronger opposition parties and has seen the continuous fragmentation and reconfiguration of micro-parties.⁶

Drawing on an original dataset of 5,230 candidates to the National Assembly and the provincial legislatures of South Africa between 1999 and 2019, the study charts the overall rate of party switching and tests hypotheses that predict the effect of party size and candidates' electoral marginality on the likelihood of switching parties. Candidates from smaller parties are more likely to turn to larger parties that can offer them more opportunities to build a career. This is also the case for marginal candidates who were almost elected to parliament and therefore have incentives to switch to secure sponsorship and evade direct competition with the best-ranked candidates within their party.⁷ On the demand side, parties, and governing and larger parties in particular, have incentives to welcome defectors so as to weaken their opponents and consolidate power. Our analyses

1 S.P. Mainwaring, *Rethinking Party Systems in the Third Wave of Democratization: The Case of Brazil* (Redwood City, Stanford University Press, 1999); G.S. Shabad and K.M. Slomczynski, 'Inter-Party Mobility among Parliamentary Candidates in Post-Communist East Central Europe', *Party Politics*, 10, 2 (2004), pp. 151–76.

2 S. Booyen, 'The Will of the Parties versus the Will of the People? Defections, Elections and Alliances in South Africa', *Party Politics*, 12, 6 (2006), pp. 727–46; E.S. McLaughlin, 'Did Floor-Crossing Alienate South African Voters? Evidence from Municipal Legislatures', *Politikon*, 41, 2 (2014), pp. 289–310; E.S. McLaughlin, 'Electoral Regimes and Party-Switching: Floor-Crossing in South Africa's Local Legislatures', *Party Politics*, 18, 4 (2012), pp. 563–79.

3 E. Klein, 'Explaining Legislative Party Switching in Advanced and New Democracies', *Party Politics*, 27, 2 (2021), pp. 329–40; D.Z. O'Brien and Y. Shomer, 'A Cross-National Analysis of Party Switching', *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 38, 1 (2013), pp. 111–41.

4 Klein, 'Explaining Legislative Party Switching'.

5 *Ibid.*; D.J. Young, 'An Initial Look into Party Switching in Africa: Evidence from Malawi', *Party Politics*, 20, 1 (2014), pp. 105–15.

6 Booyen, 'The Will of the Parties versus the Will of the People?'.

7 J.A. Cheibub, T. Moreira, G. Sin and K. Tanabe, 'Dynamic Party System Fragmentation', *Electoral Studies*, 76 (2022), pp. 1–13.

confirm our theoretical expectations. The migration flows favour the largest parties, and above all the governing party; and candidates who were nearly elected are more likely to defect in relation to their co-partisans ranked below or above the election threshold. The analyses also reveal that most candidates who switched parties tended to move to parties that fared better than their original party in the next election; and they switched from parties that either did worse or stayed the same. While the latter results are interesting, the correlation levels found in the sample are small, which means more research and alternative data are required to ascertain if candidates' estimations of whether parties will grow or shrink in the next election are decisive.

This study makes several important contributions. First, it shows that candidates' motivations to switch parties vary depending on where they are placed on the list and their election prospects. This indicates that intra-party competition matters in not only open-list and weakly institutionalised systems⁸ but also in closed-list and HDP systems. Second, while prior studies focus on floor-crossing within legislative bodies,⁹ this is the first study to observe party switching by drawing on candidate lists in a large cross-section of elections and thus providing a more comprehensive overview of this phenomenon. Several HDP systems (including South Africa between 1996 and 2002 and since 2008) have laws against parliamentary party defection, which means it is only by observing the pre-election stage that we can fully measure patterns of elite circulation between elections. Third, it contributes to refining the connections between elite theories and party system theories, demonstrating that elite circulation dynamics can reinforce the institutionalisation of dominant party systems. By successfully poaching candidates from rival parties, dominant parties can weaken the opposition and consolidate power. Looking at elite configurations deepens our understanding of how political systems function. Finally, the study contributes to the wider literature on party unity and party cohesion, which has focused mainly on western countries while neglecting Africa's developing democracies.

This study is organised as follows. We start by briefly overviewing the literature on party switching and floor-crossing and its institutional and individual drivers, in order to set the working hypotheses. The following section contextualises the patterns of party switching in South Africa. The methodological section then displays the data and methods utilised to test the hypotheses advanced. The empirical section presents the main results of the statistical analysis conducted, while the conclusion discusses the study's key implications and suggests future research avenues.

Explaining Party Switching

Political elites¹⁰ are relevant actors within society, and observing their behaviour – more specifically their switching decisions – is crucial for understanding different political outcomes, such as the functioning of party systems.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ S. Booyen, *The African National Congress and the Regeneration of Political Power* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2011); Booyen, 'The Will of the Parties versus the Will of the People?'; J. Smiles, 'Floor Crossing in South Africa: A Controversial Democratic Process', *Insight on Africa*, 3, 2 (2011), pp. 159–75.

¹⁰ 'An elite is a relatively small group within the societal hierarchy that claims and/or is accorded power, prestige, or command over others on the basis of a number of publicly recognized criteria, and aims to preserve and entrench its status thus acquired'. T. Salverda and J. Abbink, 'Introduction: An Anthropological Perspective on Elite Power and the Cultural Politics of Elites', in J. Abbink and T. Salverda (eds), *The Anthropology of Elites: Power, Culture, and the Complexities of Distinction* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 1.

Several factors affect politicians' decisions to switch parties, be it before or after being elected. The first set of explanations focuses on the effect of political institutions. The electoral system is the most well researched, but findings are still inconsistent on whether switches are more common in party-centred electoral systems (for example, closed lists) or candidate-centred systems (for example, preferential systems/open lists). Some studies find moderate to no difference across electoral rules in the prevalence of switching,¹¹ while others reveal that candidate-centred electoral systems are less likely to trigger switches than party-centred systems.¹² This is because the (re)selection and (re-)election of politicians in the former is more dependent on their performance, which means switching a party is less decisive to their careers; in contrast, there are incentives for politicians in the latter to switch because the party can shield them from possible punishment by voters.¹³ In the African context, however, countries using single-member constituencies – such as Zambia or Malawi – seem to be prone to elite defection.¹⁴ A study of South Africa's local elections, which apply a mixed-electoral system, lends further support. It shows that local legislators elected through single-member constituencies are more pressured to please their constituency and thus 'more likely to find themselves in a position where "abandoning a sailing ship" could be a necessary move for political survival', while 'PR legislators, once in the largest party in their party-centred elections, find it more difficult to find good cause to change uniforms midgame'.¹⁵

Regarding other political institutions, the regime type and the procedures for candidate selection (be they more or less decentralised) seem to have no effect on party switching,¹⁶ however, weakly institutionalised party systems tend to be more affected by switching given the weakness of party organisations and partisan ties, and higher levels of volatility and party fragmentation.¹⁷

A second set of explanations emphasises individuals' ideological and vote- or office-seeking motivations. Party switching is seen both as a tool through which ambitious politicians seek to win office¹⁸ and as a means of expressing new political ideals or expectations to influence public policies.¹⁹ In the case of older European democracies, it has been shown that politicians switch because they intend to pursue their own policy preferences,²⁰ and that a 'change in a party's policy position increases the likelihood of switching'.²¹ Ideology also matters in newer democracies, such as Brazil,²² Poland and the Czech Republic,²³ as politicians who switch tend to prefer parties that are ideologically closer. African parties are said to display weaker ideological content, hence a politician's decision to stay or leave a party is more influenced by vote- or office-seeking incentives

11 W.B. Heller and C. Mershon, 'Party Switching in the Italian Chamber of Deputies, 1996–2001', *Journal of Politics*, 67, 2 (2005), pp. 536–59. O'Brien and Shomer, 'A Cross-National Analysis of Party Switching'.

12 Klein, 'Explaining Legislative Party Switching'.

13 *Ibid.*

14 Young, 'An Initial Look into Party Switching in Africa'; L. Rakner and L. Svåsand, 'Fissions and Fusions, Foes and Friends: Party-System Re-Structuring in Malawi in the 2004 General Elections', *CMI Working Paper 2005.6* (Bergen, Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2005); J.C. Momba, 'The Case of Zambia', in KAS (ed.) *The Impact of Floor Crossing on Party Systems and Representative Democracy* (Johannesburg, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2007), pp. 61–70.

15 McLaughlin, 'Electoral Regimes and Party-Switching', p. 575.

16 O'Brien and Shomer, 'A Cross-National Analysis of Party Switching'.

17 S. Mainwaring, *Rethinking Party Systems*; Shabad and Slomczynski, 'Inter-Party Mobility'.

18 Rakner and Svåsand, 'Fissions and Fusions, Foes and Friends'.

19 W.B. Heller and C. Mershon, 'Dealing in Discipline: Party Switching and Legislative Voting in the Italian Chamber of Deputies, 1988–2000', *American Journal of Political Science*, 52, 4 (2008), pp. 910–25.

20 *Ibid.*

21 Klein, 'Explaining Legislative Party Switching', p. 334.

22 S.W. Desposato, 'Parties for Rent? Ambition, Ideology, and Party Switching in Brazil's Chamber of Deputies', *American Journal of Political Science*, 50, 1 (2006), pp. 62–80.

23 Shabad and Slomczynski, 'Inter-Party Mobility'.

than ideological or policy preferences.²⁴ This seems to explain why legislators often use material rewards to mobilise support,²⁵ why politicians with resources are so attractive to parties in places like Malawi²⁶ or Ghana,²⁷ and, surprisingly, why politicians with resources tend to switch parties more in places like Zambia.²⁸ Through an ongoing cycle of supply and demand, parties look for candidates who have more resources and these head towards the parties offering them more resources, each side seeking to lower their costs.²⁹

Building on this discussion, our hypotheses focus on vote-seeking and office-seeking incentives for switching parties that not only derive from institutional settings but also go beyond them. We argue that decisions to switch are constrained by the size of the politicians' party and by the politicians' evaluation of their standing and election prospects vis-à-vis more direct competitors within their party. The first set of hypotheses builds on the idea that candidates migrate from one party to another party if the latter offers them more resources and prospects of winning office. Studies on post-third wave democracies in Africa and elsewhere tend to confirm this expectation. In Brazil, for example, 'legislators in parties with access to federal government largess are more likely to stay put, and switchers are more likely to head for such parties'.³⁰ In the Czech Republic and Poland, there have been fleeting moments where switchers headed towards newer parties, but older and more electorally successful parties proved to be more attractive with time.³¹ We find a similar trend in a sample of African countries.

Party switching occurs frequently in weakly institutionalised party systems. In Nigeria, an average of five members of the upper chamber of the legislature switched parties yearly between 1999 and 2011 because of (re-)election concerns and a desire to have more access to patronage.³² In Zambia, the president tends to centralise the allocation of national resources, which encourages individual legislators to give him their support – and even switch to the ruling party – in exchange for increased support for their constituencies.³³ Likewise, in Malawi, parties are often a vehicle for access to government or the presidency, which triggers a high level of elite circulation as well as numerous fissions before elections and fusions after elections.³⁴ A study that investigated party switching by members of parliament (MPs) in Malawi showed that (re-)election prospects and access to the government significantly determined patterns of party switching; MPs from electorally weaker political parties, independents, and MPs who were out of the government were more

24 Young, 'An Initial Look into Party Switching in Africa'; Rakner and Svåsand, 'Fissions and Fusions, Foes and Friends'.

25 M. Collord, 'Pressuring MPs to Act: Parliament, Organized Interests and Policymaking in Uganda and Tanzania', *Democratization*, 28, 4 (2021), pp. 723–41; S.I. Lindberg, "'It's Our Time to 'Chop'": Do Elections in Africa Feed Neo-Patrimonialism Rather than Counteract It?', *Democratization*, 10, 2 (2003), pp. 121–40.

26 M. Wahman and M. Bech Seeberg, 'Paying to Play: How Parliamentary Candidates Fund Ruling Party Campaigns in Malawi', *Comparative Politics*, 55, 1 (2022), pp. 95–118.

27 N. Ichino and N.L. Nathan, 'Primaries on Demand? Intra-Party Politics and Nominations in Ghana', *British Journal of Political Science*, 42, 4 (2012), pp. 479–80; K. Asante and F. Oduro, 'The Cost of Parliamentary Politics in Ghana' (London, Westminster Foundation for Democracy, 2016), available at <https://www.wfd.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/Cost-of-Parliamentary-Politics-in-Ghana160920.pdf>, retrieved 3 October 2024.

28 L.R. Arriola, D.D. Choi, J.M. Davis, M.L. Phillips and L. Rakner, 'Paying to Party: Candidate Resources and Party Switching in New Democracies', *Party Politics*, 28, 3 (2022), pp. 507–20.

29 *Ibid.*

30 Desposato, 'Parties for Rent?', p. 75.

31 Shabad and Slomczynski, 'Inter-Party Mobility'.

32 J. Yinka Fashagba, 'Party Switching in the Senate under Nigeria's Fourth Republic', *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 20, 4 (2014), pp. 516–41.

33 L. Rakner, 'Foreign Aid and Democratic Consolidation in Zambia', in D. Resnick and N. van de Walle (eds), *Democratic Trajectories in Africa: Unravelling the Impact of Foreign Aid* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 200–27.

34 Rakner and Svåsand, 'Fissions and Fusions, Foes and Friends'.

likely to defect than MPs from electorally strong parties, who were in government and affiliated with a party.³⁵ Additionally, most of the switchers headed toward the governing party.³⁶

Switches also happen in Africa's most institutionalised party systems, where politics often revolves around dominant parties with historical roots dating back to the independence or authoritarian eras.³⁷ For example, in South Africa, Namibia and Mozambique, the ANC, the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) and the Liberation Front of Mozambique (Frelimo), respectively, have been the sole governing parties. Like other liberation parties in southern Africa, they 'were able to use the material and organisational benefits of longstanding control of the state apparatus to achieve some significant institutionalization'.³⁸ Their leading position in national and subnational politics means that they are better able to attract strong candidates or co-opt challenging candidates by offering them different types of material incentives and better career prospects.³⁹ It is often the case that smaller opposition parties are not a viable option; they are generally weak, volatile, and lack the resources and organisational depth to attract and retain good candidates.⁴⁰ In Mozambique, there has been almost no crossover between the elites of the two largest parties – Frelimo and Renamo (Mozambican National Resistance) – due to the legacies of the armed conflict,⁴¹ but smaller parties often head towards these parties.⁴²

In South Africa, the ANC was the party that capitalised most from the 2002 floor-crossing legislation that allowed legislators to switch parties without losing their seats in the national parliament or in the local municipalities.⁴³ By switching to a larger or governing party, politicians not only aspire to seats and jobs but also to all the benefits that come with being a member of a party that has more representatives in parliament. In South Africa that means, for example, more funds for staff, research and constituency work.⁴⁴ Therefore, as most studies note, candidates calculating the benefits of switching will tend to move to ruling or more electorally successful parties that can offer a better guarantee of election and access to more resources with which they can improve their political career. Larger parties are likely to welcome switchers to increase their dominance and weaken direct opponents. The controversial 2002 floor-crossing legislation allowed the ANC to increase its total number of seats in parliament from 266 (out of 400) in the 1999 election to 275 in 2002.⁴⁵ In the 2004 election, the ANC was more successful than it had been five years earlier,

35 Young, 'An Initial Look into Party Switching in Africa'.

36 *Ibid.*

37 M. Bogaards, 'Counting Parties and Identifying Dominant Party Systems in Africa', *European Journal of Political Research*, 43, 2 (2004), pp. 173–97; E. Rodrigues Sanches, *Party Systems in Young Democracies: Varieties of Institutionalization in Sub-Saharan Africa* (New York, Routledge, 2018).

38 N. van de Walle, 'Presidentialism and Clientelism in Africa's Emerging Party Systems', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 41, 2 (2003), p. 301.

39 Booyen, 'The Will of the Parties versus the Will of the People?'

40 L. Rakner and N. van de Walle, 'Opposition Weakness in Africa', *Journal of Democracy*, 20, 3 (2009), pp. 108–21.

41 S.R. Levitsky and L.A. Way, 'Beyond Patronage: Violent Struggle, Ruling Party Cohesion, and Authoritarian Durability', *Perspectives on Politics*, 10, 4 (2012), pp. 869–89.

42 Agência de Informação de Moçambique, 'Maputo Assembly Expels Six Defectors from MDM – AIM Report', 10 September 2018, available at <https://clubofmozambique.com/news/maputo-assembly-expels-six-defectors-from-mdm-aim-report>, retrieved 21 October 2022.

43 Booyen, 'The Will of the Parties versus the Will of the People?'; Smiles, 'Floor Crossing in South Africa'.

44 Smiles, 'Floor Crossing in South Africa', p. 169.

45 T. Reddy, 'South Africa: Racialized Discourse in the Context of Deteriorating Performance', in R. Doorenspleet and L. Nijzink (eds), *One-Party Dominance in African Democracies* (Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013), pp. 73–92.

obtaining 279 seats, which increased to 287 in 2007 after another round of floor-crossing.⁴⁶ Thus, we formulate that:

H1 – Legislators from smaller parties have a higher propensity to switch parties than legislators from larger parties.

H2 – Legislators from smaller parties will tend to move to more electorally successful parties.

Next, we posit that electoral marginality influences the decision to shift parties. Those facing lower levels of electoral uncertainty will have more incentives to stay put rather than migrate to a different party. In open-list and single-member districts, the safest candidates are those who are able to build a personal vote beyond party affiliation; but in closed-list proportional representation (CLPR) systems, like South Africa, it depends on where the candidate is placed on the list, which makes intra-party competition crucial.⁴⁷ In CLPR systems, voters cannot vote on candidates or rank them according to their preferences: they cast a vote for a single party and inherently approve the entire list of candidates. The list of candidates is pre-set, and candidates are numbered in an order of preference by the party: those ranked highest in the party lists have more chances of being elected, and this fuels intra-party competition for the top seats in the pre-electoral stage.⁴⁸ The highest positions on the list are often chosen by the party leadership and reward those loyal to the party and/or with a national-level political profile.⁴⁹

This implies that politicians need to please the party leadership or win internal party contests not only to be (re)selected but also to be placed in a safe position to secure (re-)election. Candidates lacking the resources, networks or the will to do so may be ranked lower on the list and fail to be (re-)elected. The most established political parties in South Africa, such as the ANC and the Democratic Alliance (DA), typically hold conferences to elect new party leaders a year or two before national elections are held. Competition for leadership positions is often fiercely contested by rival factions and candidates belonging to losing factions may be relegated to marginal positions on the party lists. These candidates are likely to leave their parties if offered a better position in a different party as this is less costly than creating a new political party. In turn, parties receiving switchers hope that the candidates will bring some support from their former parties, which can weaken the rival party and aid the electoral prospects of the destination party. In open-list systems, such as in Brazil, marginal candidates – whose personal votes place them close to the threshold of electability – are more likely to change parties due to intra-party competition for resources.⁵⁰ In contrast to weaker candidates who have no chance of being elected, marginal candidates are close to electability but face competition from stronger candidates within their parties to get the resources they need to increase their votes. As a result, they might be driven to change parties and, paradoxically, head towards a smaller party that is willing to give them the resources they seek.⁵¹

In CLPR systems, we expect that the transactional costs for switching parties will vary depending on where the candidate is placed on the list, which, as explained above, translates

46 *Ibid.*, p. 74.

47 J.M. Carey and M. Soberg Shugart, 'Incentives to Cultivate a Personal Vote: A Rank Ordering of Electoral Formulas', *Electoral Studies*, 14, 4 (1995), pp. 417–39; A. Espírito-Santo and E. Rodrigues Sanches, 'Looking for Locals under a Closed-List Proportional Representation System: The Case of Portugal', *Electoral Studies*, 52 (2018), pp. 117–27.

48 *Ibid.*

49 Espírito-Santo and Rodrigues Sanches, 'Looking for Locals'.

50 Cheibub *et al.*, 'Dynamic Party System Fragmentation'.

51 *Ibid.*

party-ordered preferences and consequently how far from election a candidate stands. Those who are highly ranked will tend to stay in the party because they occupy the safest positions, and those ranked very low have fewer incentives to switch because they are not ‘competitive’ candidates. However, those in intermediate positions but closer to the election threshold, that is marginal candidates, will tend to leave to increase their prospects of (re-)election. Parties have incentives to accept marginal candidates because they come with their resources, experience and visibility – as they were nearly elected. Therefore, the third hypothesis is that:

H3a – Legislators ranked closer to the election threshold are more likely to switch parties than their co-partisans placed at the top or bottom of the list.

In addition, and building on prior studies,⁵² we expect that *marginal candidates’ propensity to switch will vary depending on the electoral strength of their original party (H3b).*

Contextualising Party Switching in South Africa

South Africa transitioned to democracy with the organisation of elections in 1994, following a period of turmoil and struggle that led to the end of apartheid and more than four decades of racial minority rule. The members of the 400-seat National Assembly and the nine provincial legislatures were elected simultaneously under a CLPR system; the members of the Senate – the National Council of Provinces since 1997 – were nominated by delegates of the provincial legislatures, and the president was elected from among the members of the National Assembly.

The ANC came to power under Nelson Mandela, who led a Government of National Unity (GNU) that included the governing party during apartheid, the National Party (NP) – renamed the New National Party (NNP) in 1997 – and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), which dominated politics in KwaZulu-Natal province. In the general elections that have taken place every five years since 1994, the ANC has consolidated its role as the dominant party at both the national and local levels. However, the party has lost support over time, particularly in urban areas, and has faced serious electoral challenges from the DA, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), and more recently from Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), resulting in the ANC dropping to less than 50 per cent of the vote in 2024, for the first time since 1994. In addition to its HIDP system, the South African political system is shaped by institutions that are expected to foster party allegiances; namely the CLPR system and candidate selection rules that are centralised in the hands of the party leadership. Although these institutional features should make party switching a more marginal phenomenon, it is quite common, and therefore South Africa is an excellent case study for the analysis of party switching.

Alongside South Africa, other countries in southern Africa, such as Angola, Botswana, Mozambique, Namibia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe, also have a HIDP system.⁵³ These countries have distinct sets of institutions and political trajectories, and while some can be considered democratic (Botswana, Namibia and South Africa), others still encompass varying degrees of authoritarianism (Angola, Mozambique, Tanzania and Zimbabwe).

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ R. Doorenspleet and L. Nijzink, ‘One-Party Dominance in African Democracies: A Framework for Analysis’, in R. Doorenspleet and L. Nijzink (eds), *One-Party Dominance in African Democracies* (Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013), pp. 1–24.

However, all these countries have laws against parliamentary party defections;⁵⁴ these were recently approved in Botswana (2020)⁵⁵ and reinstated in South Africa in 2008.

We cannot compare levels of party switching in these HIDP systems given the lack of data and scarcity of quantitative research on this topic, but qualitative case studies allow us to identify two factors that make party switching more frequent in South Africa than in other HIDP systems. First, South Africa is a democratic regime characterised by higher levels of electoral competition – measured in terms of both the number of competing parties and those that win seats. Second, the dominant party coexists with relatively consolidated opposition parties and highly fragmented micro-parties.⁵⁶

Other HIDP systems also have unique characteristics that make them distinctive from the South Africa case. The two largest parties in Angola and Mozambique began as rival parties that also fought each other in internecine civil conflicts. The legacy of war seems to explain the polarisation of the political system around the two former belligerents, the higher barriers against new-party entry, the crystallisation of political identities, and the limited cross-over noted between the main parties. In Namibia, SWAPO has experienced factionalism and fragmentation, but the party seems to have been better able than the ANC to establish party cohesion by coupling the anti-defection law with a set of intra-party procedures such as a code of conduct and stricter disciplinary rules.⁵⁷ In Botswana, politicians crossed the floor easily in both national and local elections to join the ruling party and opposition parties due to the absence of legal impediments.⁵⁸ This has contributed to fragmenting opposition parties, but it has also affected the governing Botswana Democratic Party, which has recently approved a Bill prohibiting the defection of MPs so as to shield the party.

In South Africa, the presence of stronger and more consolidated opposition parties and the continuous fragmentation of micro-parties has made it more prone to switches when compared with these other HIDP systems. The motivations for party switching include party factionalism related to either leadership battles or breaches from the party line and, more decisively, vote-seeking and office-seeking ambitions. As the largest party, the ANC benefits from party switching because it helps to increase its national support and reinforce its claim as a movement that not only liberated the oppressed but represents all South Africans.

Intra-party succession wrangles have elicited defections from smaller to larger parties and from larger to smaller parties. One example of this resulted from the NP's decision to leave the GNU in 1996, largely because of the lopsided nature of the power-sharing agreement that concentrated decision-making in the hands of the ANC, much to the chagrin of the NP's mostly white and Afrikaner support base.⁵⁹ The decision to leave the GNU was followed by

54 M. Goeke and C. Hartmann, 'The Regulation of Party Switching in Africa', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 29.3 (2011), pp. 263–80; K. Janda, 'Laws against Party Switching, Defecting or Floor-Crossing in National Parliaments: The Legal Regulation of Political Parties', *Party Law in Modern Europe Working Paper 2* (Leiden, Party Law in Modern Europe, 2009), available at <https://www.partylaw.leidenuniv.nl/uploads/wp0209.pdf>, retrieved 2 October 2023.

55 B. Batlotleng, 'Floor Crossing Bill Passes Second Reading', *Daily News*, Gaborone, 15 December 2020, available at <https://dailynews.gov.bw/news-detail/60176>, retrieved 31 August 2023.

56 Booyesen, 'The Will of the Parties versus the Will of the People?'

57 I. Cooper, 'Dominant Party Cohesion in Comparative Perspective: Evidence from South Africa and Namibia', *Democratization*, 24, 1 (2017), pp. 1–19.

58 Goeke and Hartmann, 'The Regulation of Party Switching in Africa'; M.G. Molomo, 'Understanding Government and Opposition Parties in Botswana', *Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 38, 1 (2000), pp. 65–92.

59 N. Southern, 'The Government of National Unity and the Demise of the National Party in Post-Settlement South Africa', *Politikon*, 42, 2 (2015), p. 238.

the resignation of party leader Fredrick de Klerk. NP leaders were split on whether to rebrand the party to become more modern and revisionist or to maintain the party's conservative core values that aligned with the interests of Afrikaans speakers.⁶⁰ When the conservative wing of the party won the contest, this prompted the exit of several moderates, many of whom joined larger parties such as the ANC and DA.⁶¹ For leaders leaving the NP, the larger parties were viewed as more viable and relevant in democratic South Africa. The larger parties also offered greater access to political opportunities. Some of those who switched to the ANC were elected as MPs while others were offered appointments in state institutions.⁶²

Another instance of party switching because of intra-party succession wrangles occurred following the ANC's national conference in 2007. Thabo Mbeki, the ANC president going into the conference, was defeated by his former deputy Jacob Zuma, who mobilised the support of trade unions, the South African Communist Party and the ANC Youth League. In the aftermath of Mbeki's defeat, his allies in the ANC broke away to form the Congress of the People (COPE). Losing the presidential contest meant that Mbeki's allies also lost top positions in the party lists, and this triggered switching by ANC elites who perceived that their political aspirations were closely associated with Mbeki's leadership but were not guaranteed under Zuma.

Internal disputes on party political stances or practices also fostered splits and party switching. This was the case with the United Democratic Movement (UDM), the first new and significant political party to be formed in the post-apartheid era, under the leadership of Bantu Holomisa.⁶³ Holomisa was expelled from the ANC in 1996 after exposing corruption involving some senior party leaders.⁶⁴ In the 1999 election, the UDM won 14 seats in the 400-member parliament and became the official opposition in the Eastern Cape and Limpopo provinces. Although Holomisa did not technically switch party allegiance – as he was expelled from the ANC – UDM MPs included defectors from the ANC, IFP and NNP.⁶⁵ It is noteworthy that Holomisa was the leader of the Transkei homeland during apartheid, commanding popular support in a region that became part of Eastern Cape province, the party stronghold, in 1994. Another example is the EFF, formed in 2013 by Julius Malema, a former leader of the ANC Youth League who was expelled for several acts of misconduct.⁶⁶ After his departure, his allies in the Youth League followed him to the EFF. The party debuted in elections in 2014, winning 25 of the 400-seat national assembly, and saw its representation grow to 44 seats in the elections in 2019.

A final factor that triggered party switching was the 2002 constitutional change that allowed representatives at all tiers of government to switch parties without losing their seats. Until 2002, floor-crossing was prohibited by an 'anti-defection clause contained in the 1994

60 Booyesen, *The African National Congress and the Regeneration of Political Power*.

61 *Ibid.*

62 *Ibid.*

63 *Ibid.*

64 *Ibid.*

65 Former UDM MP Jake Maseka was previously a member of the ANC in the Northwest province. D. Matsena, 'Cops Pursue Politician's Killers', *Pretoria Rekord*, Pretoria, 14 July 2016, available at <https://rekord.co.za/312434/cops-pursue-politicians-killers>, retrieved 21 October 2022. Sipo Mzimela, the UDM's chief whip, was a senior member of the IFP prior to joining UDM and also served in Mandela's GNU Cabinet. News24, 'UDM Expels Mzimela', 30 June 2001, available at <https://www.news24.com/news24/udm-expels-mzimela-20010630>, retrieved 21 October 2022. Roelf Meyer (and at least four others) left the NNP in 1997 to form the New Movement Process, which later that year became part of the newly formed UDM.

66 N. Bauer, 'ANC Expels Julius Malema', *Mail & Guardian*, Johannesburg, 29 February 2012, available at <https://mg.co.za/article/2012-02-29-julius-malema-expelled>, retrieved 20 December 2022.

transitional Constitution' which was intended to protect citizens' electoral choices.⁶⁷ The 2002 change permitted floor-crossing in the first 15 days of the second year following an election, if the defector was a member of national, provincial or local legislatures and if at least ten per cent of party legislators were defecting.⁶⁸

The rule change was aimed at capitalising on divisions within the NNP by fostering an alliance with the ANC. This move consolidated the ANC's dominance and shifted the balance of power in favour of the ruling party. Indeed, the ANC benefited from floor-crossing as its national majority expanded and it took control of provincial legislatures in the Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal provinces that were won by the NP and IFP, respectively, in 1994. As the more dominant party, the ANC was able to encourage legislators from smaller or weaker parties to defect with promises of selection to parliament and access to state patronage. The party was also one of the major winners of the 15-day window that allowed councillors to switch parties.⁶⁹

The practice of allowing windows for party switching during the life of a parliament came to an end in 2008 after a ruling by the Constitutional Court. This did not put a stop to switching but has made it harder for the ANC to 'swallow' other parties as it did to the NNP. While numerous legislators have switched party allegiance since 1994, for the reasons discussed above, few studies have systematically analysed the causes of party switching in national and provincial legislatures. In addition to this, most studies have observed floor-crossing within the legislative bodies, thus overlooking the occurrence of this phenomenon in the pre-electoral stage and beyond the floor-crossing window. This study adds new findings by covering a larger cross-section of national elections and using candidate lists.

Methods and Data

The study makes use of candidate data furnished by the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) to test the hypotheses expressed in the previous section. The candidate data available cover the period between the 1999 and 2019 elections for national and provincial legislatures⁷⁰ for an initial count of over 50,000 candidate entries. After removing duplicate entries – candidates who ran on more than one list⁷¹ – as well as focusing on candidates who ran in at least two elections (to be able to calculate party switches), a total of 32,795 candidates were included in the final dataset. Of these, 5,230 (16 per cent) ran in the next election, covering four election pairs (1999–2004, 2004–09, 2009–14, 2014–19). They comprise the final dataset used in the article's empirical analyses.

A preliminary incursion into our data allows us to depict the migration flows between parties in all elections considered (Figure 1). There are clear trends of continuity, where some parties (particularly the ANC) seem to be able to retain the majority of their members and attract more candidates, while others experience major losses. Between 1999 and 2004, the ANC and smaller parties in parliament like the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP) and the United Christian Democratic Party (UCDP) managed to keep most of their

67 N.P.K. Masemola, 'Floor Crossing and its Political Consequences in South Africa', *EISA Occasional Paper 44* (Johannesburg, Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa, 2007), available at <https://www.eisa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/occasional-paper-2007-floor-crossing-and-its-political-consequencies-in-south-africa.pdf>, retrieved 4 October 2024, p. 4.

68 *Ibid.*

69 Booyesen, 'The Will of the Parties versus the Will of the People?'

70 Data on the elections for the First Democratic Parliament in 1994 were not available at the time of writing and were subsequently excluded from the analysis.

71 A regular feature of elections in South Africa is the right of candidates to concurrently run on multiple lists, be they national, regional or provincial, in order to increase their likelihood of winning a seat. Only one entry per candidate and election is selected for this paper, by picking the list entry in the dataset that either won a seat or holds the highest list order.

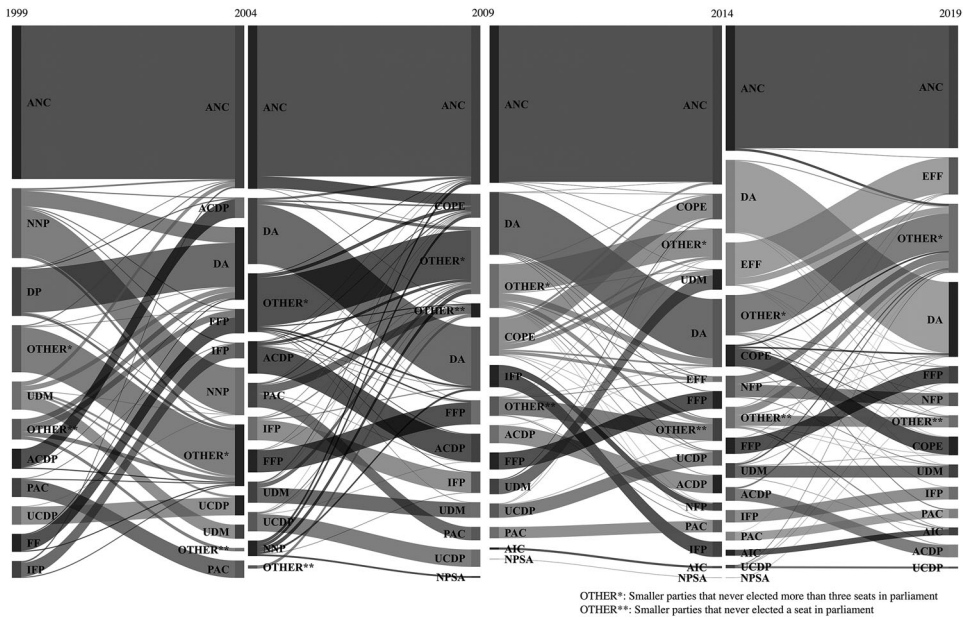


Figure 1. The direction of party switching in South Africa (1999–2019).

contingent of candidates, while the NNP and the UDM experienced major defections. NNP defectors mainly crossed over to the DA (formed in 2000), but some headed towards the ANC and smaller parties. The UDM lost nearly half of its candidates, who joined the ANC, the DA and smaller parties. In the 2004–09 period, the ANC suffered a significant defection that led to the formation of COPE, as explained in the previous section, while UDM continued to lose members. It should be noted that both the NNP and the UDM saw their parliamentary representation decrease significantly in the 1999 and 2004 elections, with the former ceasing operations in 2005. In the 2009–14 period, the ANC lost a few members to the newly formed EFF, while the COPE saw a significant share of their candidates run under different party tickets, including larger (ANC and DA) but also smaller parties. Finally, in the 2014–19 window, the EFF saw some of its members defect to integrate smaller parties’ candidate lists. As in prior electoral cycles, smaller parliamentary parties experienced many defections but, surprisingly enough, mainly headed towards smaller parties. This initial view of our data allows us to confirm our initial expectation about the migration trend, but they also reveal that many politicians from small parties defect to other small parties.

Dependent Variable

The unit of analysis is the individual candidate per district, election and list. The analysis focuses on the candidate at election *t* and looks at what they decide to do in the next election (*t* + 1). For the dependent variable, *party switch*, the paper makes use of the most recent operationalisation, which measures both the occurrence and direction of the switch.⁷² Thus, a trichotomous variable is created, coded as 0 when a candidate stays in the same party for the next election, 1 when s/he changes to a smaller party in the next election, and 2 when s/he changes to a larger party in the next election. To calculate the size of each party, the

72 Cheibub *et al.*, ‘Dynamic Party System Fragmentation’.

Table 1. Party switching in South Africa (1999–2019)

		Party switch			Total
		No switch	To smaller party	To larger party	
Legislature	1999–2004	668 (67%)	98 (10%)	232 (23%)	998 (19%)
	2004–09	1,187 (79%)	191 (13%)	119 (8%)	1,497 (29%)
	2009–14	1,209 (84%)	128 (9%)	100 (7%)	1,437 (27%)
	2014–19	1,129 (87%)	133 (10%)	36 (3%)	1,298 (25%)
	Total	4,193 (80%)	550 (11%)	487 (9%)	5,230 (100%)

paper makes use of party vote data from the IEC⁷³ and compares the vote share of a candidate's party at t with their party's vote share at $t + 1$. Table 1 shows a summary of all party switches in South Africa from 1999 to 2019.

The majority of the candidates who ran in more than one election ran under the same party label (4,193, or 80 per cent). Of the remaining 20 per cent who ran in two elections but under different party labels, 550 went to a smaller party and 487 to a larger party. The data therefore show that candidates who decide to run again under a different party in South Africa seem to be almost equally split between those who run with a smaller party and those who run with a larger party, with a slight edge for smaller parties. This preliminary finding seems to reject H1; however, it does not hold once we run the models and introduce the controls.

Independent and Control Variables

Following the paper's hypotheses, the first independent variable is the size of the candidate's party (*party size*), which is calculated drawing on the share of votes a party received at election t . It aims to test our expectations under H1, which posits that the smaller the candidate's party at election t , the greater the likelihood they will choose to switch parties at election $t + 1$; and H2, which posits that candidates from smaller parties at election t are likely to head towards larger parties at election $t + 1$. In the second independent variable, the candidate's *marginality*, all the listed candidates who were close to the election threshold but did not manage to win a seat were coded 1, and all other candidates were coded 0, including candidates who won a seat and candidates who lost but were too low on the list and thus not considered to have lost marginally. We considered marginal candidates as those between one and three list positions below the list position that managed to win a seat. As an example, if a party list in a specific province has 20 candidates and manages to win ten seats, marginal candidates are the ones sitting in list positions 11, 12 and 13 while the rest are not considered marginal. This variable allows us to test H3a, which posits that those closer to the election threshold at election t are more likely to switch parties at election $t + 1$; and also H3b, which tests if marginal candidates' decisions to switch are moderated by their party size.

The analysis includes several control variables at both the individual and institutional levels. *Electoral experience* is measured by counting the number of elections in which the candidate has participated since 1999. Candidates who contested more elections will have a lower probability of switching parties because they have been selected several times and are also more known to the party selectorate and potentially the electorate, so they would face higher costs by switching. The variable *incumbency* considers whether the candidate won a

73 For data on party vote shares, see the IEC's election results portal, which has downloadable data for all elections. Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC), 'National and Provincial Election Results', available at <https://results.elections.org.za/home/downloads/npe-results>, retrieved 30 November 2022.

Table 2. Summary statistics of the dependent, independent and control variables

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Pctl. 25	Pctl. 75	Max
Party switch	5,230						
... No switch	4,193	80.2%					
... To smaller party	550	10.5%					
... To larger party	487	9.3%					
Marginality	5,230	0.111	0.314	0	0	0	1
Party size	5,230	24.781	29.21	0	0.75	62.15	69.69
Electoral experience	5,230	1.408	0.687	1	1	2	4
Gender	5,230	0.324	0.468	0	0	1	1
Minister	5,230	0.022	0.147	0	0	0	1
List type	5,230						
... National	901	17.2%					
... Provincial	2,748	52.5%					
... Regional	1,581	30.2%					
Incumbency	5,230	0.4	0.49	0	0	1	1

seat at election t ($1 =$ seat won) and allows us to test its effect t on party switching at election $t + 1$. It is logical to suppose that candidates who were in office at the time of a new election will enjoy several advantages, namely being protected against deselection and electoral defeat.⁷⁴ This means that incumbents will switch parties only if and when they cannot secure the nomination for re-election in their former parties.⁷⁵ Lastly, we consider whether the candidate had been *minister* at any time before election t ($1 =$ ministerial position held) and his/her *gender* ($1 =$ female). In terms of institutional variables, we control for the *list type*, which measures whether the candidate is running in national, regional or provincial lists. National and regional lists belong to the National Assembly and provincial lists to the provincial legislatures. We are aware that other important individual-level data such as age, education and profession could also help predict the probability of switching parties. However, we excluded these variables from the analyses because, despite our requests, the IEC did not share these data with us due to personal data protection laws.

Table 2 presents summary statistics of all variables that entered the models. Looking at the independent and control variables, it is notable that candidates generally have little electoral experience (fewer than two elections on average), and there are few female candidates, incumbents and ministers in the sample. Finally, half of the sample ran on provincial lists (52.5 per cent), while the remaining competed on regional (30.2 per cent) and national (17.2 per cent) lists.

Explaining Party Switching in South Africa

The empirical analysis fits a multinomial logit where two categories of the dependent variable, that is, switching ‘to smaller party’ and switching ‘to larger party’, are contrasted with the reference category ‘no party switch’, which is omitted by default. Table 3 presents the overall results, with three specifications. Model 1 includes only the two covariates of interest (party size and marginality), Model 2 has all the covariates, and Model 3 includes an interaction term between the two covariates of interest.

Table 3 shows ample evidence in support of H1. Party size seems to be negatively affecting the likelihood that a candidate will choose to switch parties in the next election. As expected, the coefficients are consistently negative for making a move to both a larger and a smaller party. Additionally, the left side of Figure 1, which plots the probability of all

74 Desposato, ‘Parties for Rent?’.

75 Fashagba, ‘Party Switching in the Senate under Nigeria’s Fourth Republic’.

Table 3. Determinants of party switching in South Africa

	Results					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	To smaller party (1)	To larger party (2)	To smaller party (3)	To larger party (4)	To smaller party (5)	To larger party (6)
Marginality	0.039 (0.135)	0.342** (0.136)	0.035 (0.139)	0.472*** (0.143)	0.060 (0.144)	0.454*** (0.155)
Party size	-0.027*** (0.002)	-0.071*** (0.007)	-0.018*** (0.003)	-0.085*** (0.009)	-0.018*** (0.003)	-0.085*** (0.009)
Minister			-1.166 (1.018)	0.101 (1.189)	-1.172 (1.018)	0.101 (1.191)
List type: provincial			0.048 (0.137)	0.190 (0.159)	0.050 (0.137)	0.190 (0.159)
List type: regional			-0.080 (0.149)	0.246 (0.169)	-0.080 (0.149)	0.245 (0.169)
Gender			-0.074 (0.105)	-0.102 (0.124)	-0.072 (0.105)	-0.104 (0.125)
Incumbency			-0.679*** (0.146)	0.718*** (0.143)	-0.687*** (0.146)	0.720*** (0.143)
Electoral experience			-0.356*** (0.093)	-0.395*** (0.124)	-0.357*** (0.093)	-0.394*** (0.124)
Marginality * Party Size					-0.011 (0.019)	0.017 (0.047)
Constant	-1.367*** (0.116)	-0.255*** (0.092)	-0.952*** (0.186)	-0.124 (0.202)	-0.955*** (0.186)	-0.124 (0.203)
N		5230		5230		5230
Akaike Inf. Crit.		5,739.120		5,672.346		5,675.798

Notes: *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01. Coefficients estimated with multinomial logit regression.

A control variable for election fixed effects is included in the model but not displayed.

Reference group for list type variable is national list.

possible moves for candidates (that is, no switch, switch to a smaller party, or switch to a larger party) shows more clearly that as the candidate's party size increases so does the likelihood of their choosing to stay in their party.

The analysis seems to further support H2 in that the effect of a candidate's party size is more pronounced for the choice to move to a larger party. Not only is the coefficient in all models larger in comparison to moving to a smaller party, but Figure 2 (left side) also demonstrates graphically that the probability of switching parties diminishes for those in larger parties and as the party size increases. By and large, the data on South Africa confirm that vote-seeking and office-seeking motivations shape candidates' decisions to cross over; they will tend to stay put if they originally belong to a larger party, but will seek out better opportunities in larger and more electorally successful parties if they belong to smaller parties. This confirms the trends observed in both established⁷⁶ and post-third wave democracies in Africa (Malawi, Nigeria and Zambia) and elsewhere (Brazil, Poland and the Czech Republic),⁷⁷ but also what other scholars have charted for the South African case.⁷⁸

Moving on to candidates' electoral marginality, the empirical analysis shows that marginal candidates are less likely to stay in the same party when compared to their co-partisans placed at the top or bottom of the party lists. H3a is supported as the coefficients in

76 Klein, 'Explaining Legislative Party Switching'.

77 Shabad and Slomczynski, 'Inter-Party Mobility'; Arriola *et al.*, 'Paying to Party'; Desposato, 'Parties for Rent?'; Young, 'An Initial Look into Party Switching in Africa'; Fashagba, 'Party Switching in the Senate under Nigeria's Fourth Republic'.

78 S. Booyesen, *The African National Congress and the Regeneration of Political Power*; Booyesen, 'The Will of the Parties versus the Will of the People?'; Smiles, 'Floor Crossing in South Africa'.

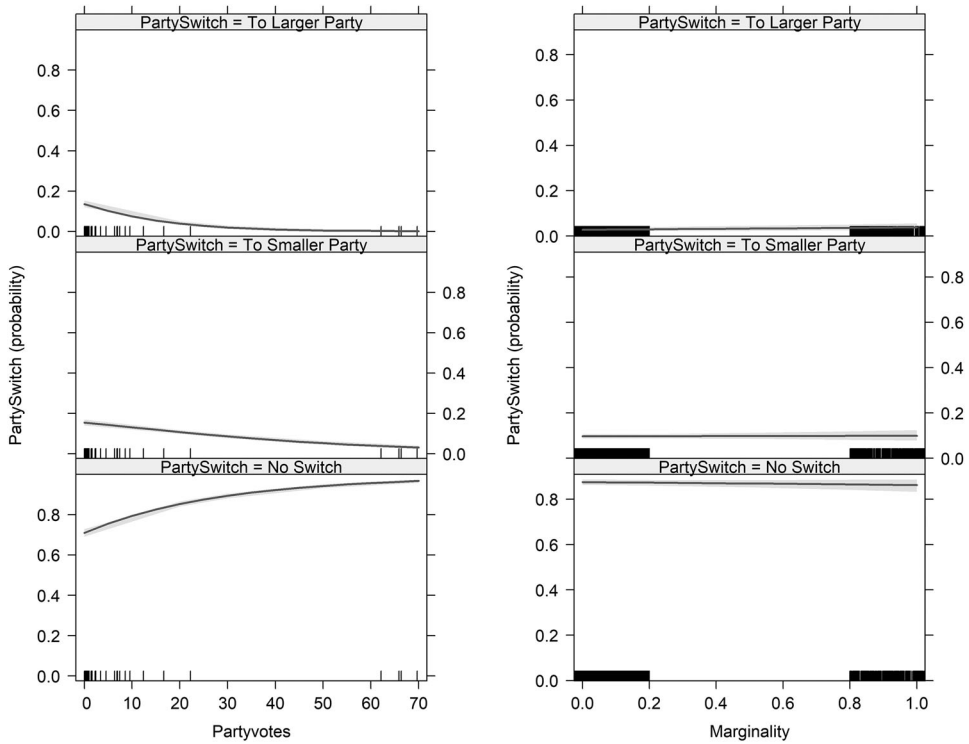


Figure 2. Predicting party switching: party size and marginality effects.
 Note: Multinomial logit estimates with controls.

Table 3 are positive and statistically significant and the same effect is evident from plotting the probabilities on the right side of Figure 1. Indeed, being closer to the electability threshold increases the probability of candidates choosing to migrate to a larger party, but the probability of moving to a smaller party remains unaffected. This indicates that intra-party competition, that is, where on the list candidates are placed, is crucial to determine the decision to stay or leave. Regarding H3b, the interaction term between party size and electoral marginality does not seem to be statistically significant, which means that there is no clear moderation of the effect of marginality by party size, at least according to these data.

In terms of control variables, as expected, more electorally experienced candidates are less likely to switch parties, while incumbents are less likely to move to smaller parties but more likely to move to larger parties. This indicates that in South Africa, incumbency is an asset and that the electoral and party selection rules tend to shield these politicians. Parties welcome incumbents because of their visibility, networks, expertise and professionalisation, and incumbents search for better opportunities in larger parties. This contrasts with the cases where legislators are more exposed to electoral uncertainty due to electoral and party rules.⁷⁹

These results confirm the importance of vote-seeking and office-seeking incentives, and of intra-party-competition in switching decisions. However, the candidates' estimation of whether their current party (t) or the party to which they are considering switching is likely to grow or shrink in the next election ($t + 1$) is another factor that might explain switches.

79 Fashagba, 'Party Switching in the Senate under Nigeria's Fourth Republic'; Young, 'An Initial Look into Party Switching in Africa'.

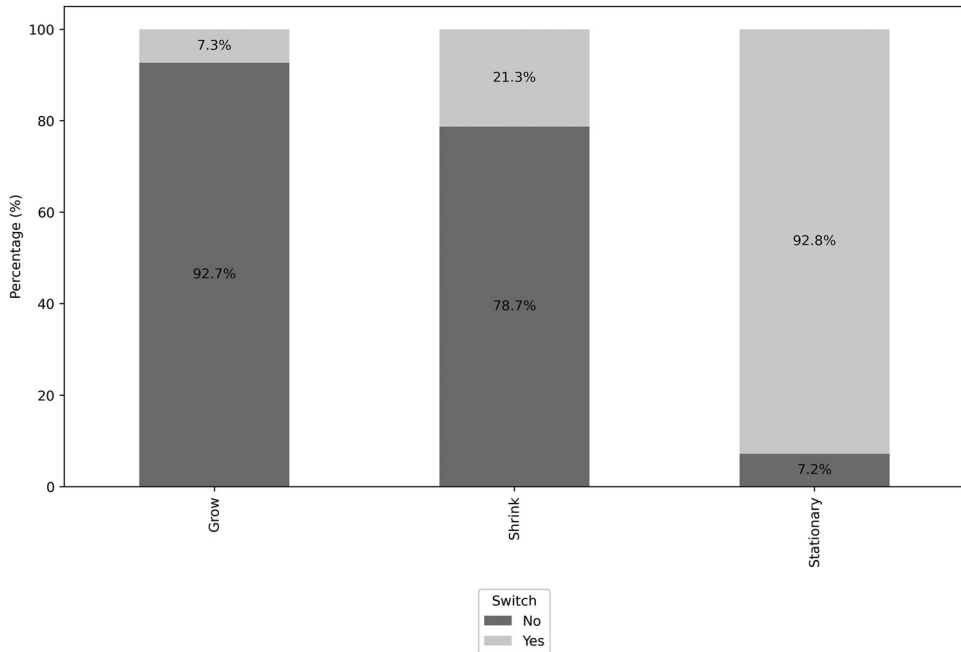


Figure 3. Seat share performance of the previous party when candidates switch or do not switch at $t + 1$ (all candidates).

Ideally, this could be confirmed with interview or survey data; however, using our data we ran additional analyses to observe if candidates came from or switched to parties that grew, shrank or stayed the same in the following election. The first analysis includes all candidates based on their decision to switch or not (Figure 3) and the second analysis includes only those who switched parties (Figure 4).

Two general trends can be observed. First, candidates who switch mainly come from parties that shrank or stayed the same in a given election. In fact, only a few come from parties that improved their electoral results (Figure 3). Second, candidates who decide to switch generally go to parties that grow in the next election (Figure 4). Although these results are interesting, additional tests revealed small correlation levels, which means that the relationship between party performance and the decision to switch is not linear.

Overall, the analyses produced three major results. First, there is a great deal of party switching between elections: we counted 20 per cent of switchers in the period covered. In most elections, the dominant party (ANC) managed to keep its contingent of candidates, while newly formed parties (for example, DA and COPE) and smaller parties (for example, NNP and UDM) found it more difficult to keep party unity and deter defection in some election cycles. Furthermore, we found that several candidates from smaller parties chose to move to other small parties that never made it into parliament or had little representation, which speaks to the more fluid nature of competition in the margins of the political system. This clearly warrants more research, as it suggests that other factors, beyond vote-seeking and office-seeking goals, may be at play.

Second, party size and the candidate's marginality influence the likelihood of switching: candidates from smaller parties and who stood closer to the election threshold were more likely to switch (to larger) parties in the next election. While the first finding is in line with most studies in advanced and new democracies, the second is innovative. It suggests that a candidate's place on the list can create different incentives to switch parties, and that intra-

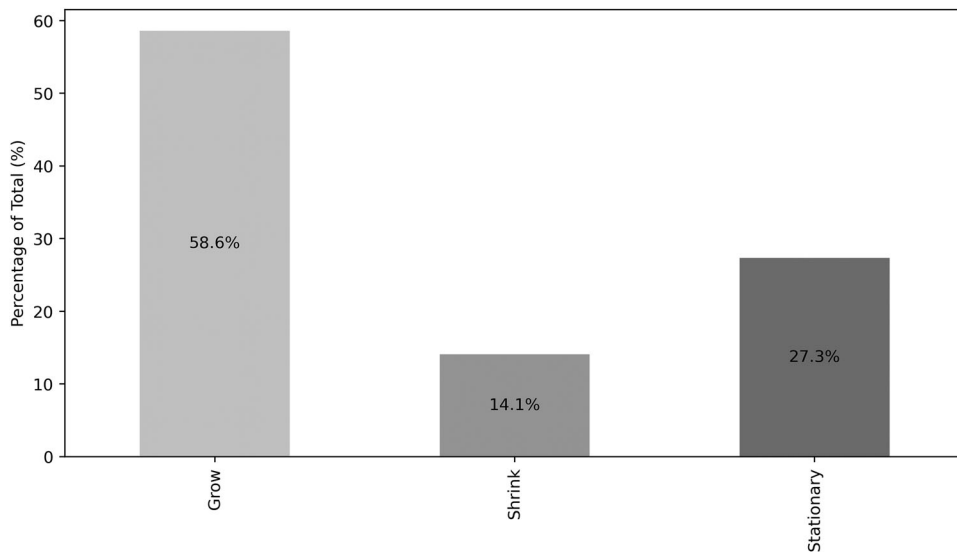


Figure 4. Seat share performance of the party to which the candidate switched at $t+1$ (only switching candidates).

party competition is also crucial in CLPR and HIDP systems and not only in open-list and weakly institutionalised party systems as usually assumed. Finally, most candidates who switched parties tended to go to parties that fared better than their original party in the next election; and they switched from parties that either did worse or stayed the same. While we did not find a strong correlation linking party performance to switches, this is an interesting finding that deserves further research.

Among the control variables, only few attain statistical significance: experienced candidates are less likely to switch to any political party, while incumbents avoid smaller parties but might head towards even larger parties. Thus, South Africa is like other countries in southern Africa and other post-third wave democracies where politicians frequently switch parties because of their interest in (re-)election and a desire to access benefits in larger parties, especially those in government. Leadership battles and internal factionalism also provoke switches, but even these are motivated by political ambitions more often than ideological or policy disputes.

To exemplify this, after Zuma's departure as ANC president in December 2017, some of his supporters formed a new opposition party, the African Transformation Movement, fearing that their political ambitions would be curtailed under the new president, Cyril Ramaphosa. But another party, the African Congress for Transformation, was formed in August 2023 – less than a year before the next polls in 2024 – by a powerful ally of Zuma who was expelled from the ANC. In December 2023, Zuma announced that he would support the newly formed MK party, before becoming its leader in May 2024. This demonstrates that even when political elites defect to smaller parties, they are often motivated by their political ambitions. While the practice of party switching may appear to be unprincipled, it has had the effect of making South Africa's political system more competitive, to the extent that the ANC's support decreased to just under 58 per cent in the 2019 national elections, to about 46 per cent in the 2021 municipal elections, before collapsing to 40 per cent in the 2024 national elections. In the most recent elections, the ANC lost a significant amount of support in KwaZulu-Natal province, where local politicians and party organisers who were loyal to Zuma defected to the MK party. The EFF

also lost support to the MK party, with high-profile leaders defecting from the former to the latter, both before and after the elections. There have also been breakaway parties from the largest opposition party, the DA. Most notable examples of this are ActionSA, formed in 2020 by Herman Mashaba, the DA's former mayor of Johannesburg, and Build One South Africa, formed in 2022 by Mmusi Maimane, the former leader of the DA in the National Assembly. While these parties had the potential to take support away from the DA, especially in urban areas, their effect was limited. The DA increased its vote share by more than 1 per cent, gaining three seats in the National Assembly, before joining the ANC-led 'GNU' (which comprises ten political parties) as the second-largest party.

Conclusion

This study investigated party switching in South Africa using an original dataset of candidates running for national and provincial legislatures between 1999 and 2019. This is the first study to observe party switching in candidate lists in a large cross-section of elections, which makes it an important empirical contribution. South Africa is an interesting case study because compared to other HIDP systems it has a more competitive party system, moderately strong opposition parties, and has experienced continuing fragmentation of micro-parties. As argued before, such features make it more prone to switches. The analyses reveal that candidates from smaller parties and who fail to be re-elected by the narrowest margin are more likely to switch parties in the next election. The data also depict a general trend in which switchers tend to come from parties that performed worse or stayed the same in a given election and move to parties that fared better than their original party in the next election – but the relationship between party electoral performance and switches is not strong or linear. Overall, these results confirm the importance of career prospects and political ambitions, and highlight, in innovative ways, the importance of intra-party competition within CLPR systems.

These findings have important implications for future research. First, they shed light on the heterogeneous effects of list order and election prospects on party switching, in that candidates have different incentives to stay or leave depending on where on the list they stand. Second, they show that CLPR systems and institutionalised party systems can coexist with relatively high levels of party switching. In South Africa, the apparent stasis uncovers flows from both smaller to larger parties and between smaller parties as well. The dominant ANC can attract ambitious politicians and at the same time fragment the opposition and weaker parties, whose members have no other option but to circulate in the 'margins of the party system'. Hence, by looking at switching patterns we shed light on party system functioning and mechanisms of party system institutionalisation. Finally, it adds to debates linking elite configurations to political outputs, namely how individual decisions shape political outputs such as party system functioning.

Future research should investigate patterns of party switching taking into account important biographical data that were not available for this study (for example, age and professional background). It should also investigate elite circulation in the margins of the party system (between smaller parties), and whether switching pays off (that is, where switchers go and whether their careers progress). This can be done using a combination of different sources of data, namely interviews and surveys that can more accurately measure politicians' motivations and incentives to stay or leave their party. Such an approach would address some of the limitations of our study, as we did not explore, for example, the role of more substantive motives for switching parties, particularly whether candidates move to more ideologically congruent parties. This would give an indication of whether switchers wish to revive their ideas in a new 'political home'. Additionally, more proxies could be used to capture material or career incentives for switching parties.

Research will also be useful for comparing patterns of party switching in South Africa with other HIDP systems in southern Africa that have CLPR systems and that are also governed by political parties with histories as liberation movements, such as Angola, Mozambique and Namibia. Unlike Angola and Mozambique, South Africa has the added distinction of being democratic and with higher levels of party competition in terms of parties that compete in elections and those that win seats in parliament. We expect that the extent of party switching in South Africa will be more similar to the levels of switching in democratic countries than in authoritarian HIDP systems that have high levels of political polarisation and limited space for opposition parties to compete. It is also necessary to investigate whether party switching promotes competition between parties and increases the representation of citizens or whether it benefits the defecting legislators at the expense of voters.

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