

Potential political defectors can be identified according to archetype

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The world of politics is often depicted as one of intrigue, political machinations and Machiavellian ethics. A world where personal loyalty to a party can bring about change in society, and where disloyalty can

topple a government. As a result, party whips are employed in many political systems, including in the Westminster system of government, to keep party members in line. But now it turns out that some members are already predisposed to defection. A study from the University of Leicester has identified an 'archetype' for someone who is likely to break political ranks in the political landscape of the United Kingdom.

Dr Alun Wyburn-Powell, from the School of Historical Studies at the University of Leicester, spoke about the research and about the political defections that grab the headlines. 'Virtually every week there are defections among local councillors and also less frequently among MEPs, MPs and Lords. Defections grab headlines, worry party leaders and can change the dynamics of Parliament. Defections have never been comprehensively studied before and are not well understood by party leaders or commentators,' he said.

The research detailed in the book charts a history of defections over a century, and may serve as a useful guide of identifying the characteristics of defectors. 'Over the last century the most likely individuals to defect were male, wealthy, divorced, Eton-educated, from a minority religion, former senior army officers and those who entered politics early.

There is a pattern to defections. It is not just a random group of individuals taking one-off decisions. Among defectors, 53 percent defected for better prospects, 43 percent over policy and 3 percent because of personalities. Defection, on average, is a career-enhancing move - chances of ministerial office and honours are higher for defectors than for loyalists.

'A political defection is an expert opinion on the state of the party at a particular point in time. My findings are based on a study of all 707 people who sat as a Liberal or LibDem (Liberal Democrats) MPs from

1910 to 2010. Of all these MPs 16 percent (about one in six) defected. I also studied the smaller number of MPs and former MPs who defected into the Liberals/LibDems and investigated the cases of other defectors who went straight from Labour to the Conservatives and vice-versa. Virtually all Liberal defectors to the Conservatives were happy with their move, but over half of Liberal defectors to Labour were dissatisfied.

In more recent history he noted a change in where the defectors were coming from, noting that it is now more common for conservatives to abandon their party than in the past. 'It is the Conservatives who are suffering the most defections. This is a turn-around - for most of the last century the Conservatives were the most cohesive party and the Liberals the most likely to suffer defections,' Dr Wyburn-Powell said.

'This pattern may well continue, if the actions of Lord Stevens and departing Conservative councillors are an indication of things to come. Some Conservative MPs are uncomfortable with the coalition and disillusioned about their own career prospects, with many Liberal Democrats occupying ministerial jobs. The coalition government's attitude towards Europe has alienated many Conservatives and they see UKIP posing a serious threat in some constituencies.

Conversely, few Liberal Democrats are defecting, which signals a change from past examples set by the party. Given the rare chance that the coalitions has presented, most [Liberal Democrats](#) find that they prefer being unpopular but in power, to being liked but ignored as a forgotten third party.'

Dr Wyburn-Powell added: 'I set out to explore the reasons for defections from the Liberal Party in order to discover their role in the party's near collapse and recovery. The reasons for, and timing of, the decline of the Liberal Party is still contested by historians. My research pinned more of the blame for outward defections on Lloyd George than on Asquith or

any other leader. I suspected that there were undiscovered patterns in past defections and that they were not just a random collection of individual decisions.

'My research reveals a long-term social compatibility between the Liberals and the Conservatives, which was not the case between the Liberals and Labour. However, in terms of policy, Labour and the LibDems are fairly compatible. It is in the interests of both these parties to work on their relationship, as they may need to form a coalition after the next election.

'Investigating past relationships between parties can lead to a better mutual understanding and respect, which can help in the formation of a future coalition. Studying the reasons for past defections can help parties to avoid losing future defectors.'

In the past he has also offered a few words of advice for party leaders and how they should deal with defectors, namely: 'Do not change policies to avoid defections - it will only encourage others to threaten to defect and it is likely to draw your policies away from the centre ground, where most of the voters are. Smaller parties, especially those on the right, tend to be fragile, prone to leadership tussles and internal rifts. They provide the most unstable element of our otherwise very inert political system.'

In addition he noted that some parties could be better off if certain people left and as a result potential defectors could be divided into two categories, 'those they want to keep and they would be happy to lose'. Regarding those people parties should lose, he recounted the words of advice from former politician Tony Benn: 'If they leave, play down their significance and do not get into a slanging match with them. In the words of advice which Tony Benn told me his father offered him 'Don't wrestle with a chimney sweep' - you will both end up covered in dirt.

'With the first category, party leaders should listen to them and go out of their way personally to befriend them - friendship cannot be delegated. Alexander MacCallum Scott, who defected from the Liberal Party to Labour in the 1920s, said that he would probably have stayed, but squabbling party leaders Asquith and Lloyd George 'held out no hand'.

More information: Dr Wyburn-Powell's, 'Defectors and the Liberal Party 1910 to 2010 - A Study of Inter-party Relationships' is published by Manchester University Press.

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