Sunshine State dilemma: Voting for the 2014 governor of Florida

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ABSTRACT

The 2014 Florida gubernatorial election pitted a highly unpopular incumbent Republican against a former Republican governor since turned independent to Democratic challenger. For the duration of his first term in office, Governor Rick Scott was plagued by low approval ratings generated directly from a series of decisions that proved unpopular to most Florida voters. Fortunately for Scott, however, his opponent for reelection was none other than Charlie Crist, his predecessor in Tallahassee who chose to vacate the governorship in 2010 in a failed bid for the U.S. Senate in which he shed his Republican affiliation only to lose to Republican Marco Rubio. Since then, Crist switched from no party affiliation to the Democratic Party and then launched a spirited bid to win back his old job from Governor Scott. In this study, we use survey data supplemented by other popular accounts to demonstrate that the 2014 Florida gubernatorial election was a classic case of voters perceiving their choice as the lesser of two evils. And in this case, the low approval rating of Governor Scott was less damaging than Crist’s party switch, an action that proved electorally fatal.

On November 4, 2014, Rick Scott was reelected governor of Florida. Scott defeated a party switcher who was the immediate predecessor to his office, Charlie Crist. As was the case in 2010, Governor Scott was held to under a majority of the vote in 2014. In fact, at 50.6 percent of the two-party vote, Governor Scott won almost exactly the same share of the vote in 2014 as he did in 2010.1

But unlike 2010, a campaign that was remarkable for wholly ignoring the media and appealing directly to Floridians with over $70 million spent and most of it his personal funds, Governor Scott was a known commodity in 2014 and still barely won. By contrast, the 2014 gubernatorial race featured two candidates familiar to most Florida voters, but we contend in this study that the contest was so close because both candidates were viewed as deeply flawed, although for different reasons.

Governor Scott has never enjoyed majority approval from Florida residents. Indeed, he has proven to be one of the most unpopular governors to serve since the 2010 elections.2 By contrast, his 2014 opponent, Charlie Crist, has enjoyed impressive approval ratings for much of the time he served in public office, including his most recent tenure as Florida governor from 2006 to 2010, when he was a member of the Grand Old Party (GOP). But Crist suffered from a different problem, which we will demonstrate proved even more electorally detrimental: a party switch that left a substantial segment of Florida voters distrustful of what they perceived to be a politically opportunistic strategy undertaken to win back the governorship. Regarding the first point, the unpopularity of Governor Scott, the 2014 exit poll of Florida voters showed 44 percent favorable and 53 percent unfavorable, whereas 51 percent of voters had a favorable opinion of Charlie Crist (44 percent unfavorable). And with respect to the second point, 60 percent of voters agreed that Charlie Crist changed his party affiliation “more to help him win elections,” while just 30 percent thought the switch was done “more to reflect his beliefs.”3 In short, the typical

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1 The two-party vote in 2010 was 2,619,335 for Republican Rick Scott and 2,557,785 for Democrat Alex Sink. The two-party vote in 2014 was 2,865,343 for Republican Rick Scott and 2,801,198 for Democrat Charlie Crist. Data are from the Florida Department of State Division of Elections.

2 In a list of governors up for reelection in 2014, Rick Scott’s approval rating was the third lowest; see the New York Times article, “Which governors are most vulnerable in 2014?”, http://fivethirtyeight.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/08/which-governors-are-most-vulnerable-in-2014/?r=1.

3 The data can be found here: http://www.foxnews.com/politics/elections/2014/exit-polls/year=2014&type=governor&filter=FL. The vote split for favorability toward Governor Scott was: 86 to 10 in favor of Crist for those with an unfavorable opinion of Scott (53 percent); 91 to 8 in favor of Scott for those who approved of him (44 percent). The vote split for favorability toward Charlie Crist was: 88 to 8 in favor of Scott for those with an unfavorable opinion of Crist (44 percent); 87 to 12 in favor of Crist for those who approved of him (51 percent). Of the 30 percent of voters who thought Crist switched party affiliation mainly to better reflect his beliefs the vote split 82 to 16 in favor of Crist, whereas among the 60 percent who thought Crist switched parties to win elections, the vote split 71 to 22 percent in favor of Scott. These vote choice numbers do not sum to 100 percent because of a third party candidate, Adrian Wylie.
Florida voter was faced with a dilemma in the 2014 gubernatorial election: a choice between an unlikeable incumbent versus an opportunistic challenger. Our findings indicate that dislike proved a more popular option than distrust.

The paper proceeds as follows. We begin with a discussion of the unpopularity of Governor Scott and then touch on the party switching literature as it relates to the behavior of Charlie Crist. Next, we briefly sketch the dynamics of the 2014 campaign. Then we describe the survey data used to examine vote choice in the 2014 Florida gubernatorial election. We follow with our results from a multivariate analysis that accounts for the significance of candidate favorability and Crist’s party switch on vote choice. Finally, we conclude with a brief summary statement of our findings and what this election tells us about voting behavior when voters are given the choice between two unpalatable candidates.

1. Two unsavory candidates

Ever since the day Rick Scott assumed the executive office in Tallahassee, his approval rating has been underwater. Scott has failed to curry favor with a majority of Florida voters primarily because of his substantive actions as governor. For instance, staying true to his Tea Party principles, Governor Scott adhered to his pledge of denying a $1 billion federal loan to help partially underwrite the cost of a high-speed rail system connecting Tampa to Orlando. This infrastructure project was highly popular, including among the Republican state legislative delegation and Orlando-based members of Congress. Governor Scott also approved a $1 billion dollar reduction in K-12 education spending, which was subsequently followed by a $300 million cut to the higher education budget. But as the time finally neared for his reelection, Governor Scott frantically moved away from the far right and comfortably into the electoral center by advocating for the federal healthcare subsidy available through President Obama’s 2010 Affordable Care Act (which his Republican legislature blocked).

In addition to taking highly unpopular policy-based actions for most of his first term and then at the last minute hurriedly pivoting to find the moderate middle where the median Florida voter resides, Governor Scott repeatedly found himself at the center of more personalized scandals emanating from within his administration. Perhaps the most visible was the embarrassing resignation of his Lieutenant Governor Jennifer Carroll in March of 2013. Carroll was just the most high profile of several members of Scott’s team to step down during his first term because of actions that betrayed the public’s trust. Even after winning reelection, Governor Scott’s approval rating rests comfortably below the 50-percent mark. And again, his actions seem most responsible for his perpetual unpopularity—like forcing the early departure of the chief of law enforcement, who intended to retire within the year and most recently banning use of the term “climate change” among employees working in state agencies like the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. A February 2015 Quinnipiac poll put Scott’s approval at 42 percent and his disapproval at 47 percent; confirming the statement by Tampa Bay Times political reporter Steve Bousquet: “Scott’s stubbornly low approval ratings have stalked him since he took office in 2011.”

Indeed, our own survey data reaffirms the unpopularity of Governor Scott vis-à-vis Charlie Crist, as the 2014 election drew near. We created a favorability scale ranging from 1 to 10 with 10 most favorable and 1 least favorable. Among our survey respondents, the average favorability for Rick Scott was 4.63 (n = 1886). By comparison, the average favorability for Charlie Crist was 5.28 (n = 1874). A simple difference of means test reveals that the favorability rating for Crist was significantly greater than the rating for Scott (p < .001). Similarly, the median favorability rating for Scott was 5, whereas the median rating for Crist was 6. Finally, we display the frequency distributions for candidate favorability in Fig. 1. Over half of the respondents (50.9 percent) rated Scott a 4 or less on the scale, and a substantial 27.5 percent rated him a 1 (versus 19.4 percent for Crist). By comparison, over half of the respondents (50.8 percent) rated Crist a 6 or higher. We will use the favorability scales for both candidates in the vote choice model since they are expected to be a major factor shaping voter preferences.

It is difficult to devise a fictitious candidate more different than Charlie Crist is to Rick Scott. Whereas Rick Scott appears almost comically unsuited for a high-profile elective office because of his palatable socially awkward disposition, Charlie Crist is a natural-born politician, perfectly embracing his erstwhile slogan, “the people’s governor.” Charlie Crist constructed a political career that has proven tragically ironic. In classic Downsian (1957) theory, Crist always sought the median voter, expecting that most of the votes could be won in the electoral center. This seemed a successful strategy for most of his tenure in public office, as Florida Attorney General and then as Florida Governor. And in a state with such a large number of political independents (at least in terms of those registered unaffiliated: 23 percent at the time of the November 2014 election), Crist was masterful at staking out positions in line with popular opinion. But in an age of increasingly polarized party politics and volatile short-term electoral conditions, Crist surprisingly found himself out of step with the electorate he came to know so well in 2010, when he departed the governorship for a U.S. Senate run.

The political winds took a hard right turn in the 2010 election as a Republican tsunami swept GOP upstart and former Florida House Speaker Marco Rubio into Florida’s open U.S. Senate seat. Charlie Crist finished second to Rubio and in the process chose to abandon his Republican affiliation, opting for no party affiliation (NPA) once it became clear that he would have lost to Rubio in the Republican primary (see McKee and Craig, 2011; McKee and Hood, 2013). Crist’s strategy to occupy the vote-rich middle backfired, because a Republican tide pushed a majority of political independents in

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9 The following voter registration data for the 2014 November general election as compiled by the authors from the Florida Department of State Division of Elections website is: Democrats – 38.7 percent; Republicans – 35.0 percent; no party affiliation – 23.3 percent; other party – 3.0 percent.
favor of Rubio.\textsuperscript{10} Perhaps learning that no party affiliation placed him in a political “no man’s land,” in the interim between his senatorial defeat and the aftermath of the 2012 presidential election, Crist decided to switch to the Democratic Party in December of 2012. Emphasizing his centrist approach to politics, on the popular political show “Hardball with Chris Matthews,” referring to the Republican Party Crist “argued, [it] is not very compassionate or tolerant, and ‘middle of the road, commonsense Republicans’ are a dying breed.”\textsuperscript{11}

But as a growing political science literature has found, and more importantly, party switchers themselves have realized, political defection can come at a very steep electoral price (see Grose, 2004; Grose and Yoshinaka, 2003; McKee and Yoshinaka 2015; Yoshinaka, 2012; Yoshinaka and McKee, 2015). Perhaps former Alabama congressman Glen Browder said it best with respect to party affiliation placed

```
import matplotlib.pyplot as plt

# Favorability ratings data
favorability_ratings = [25, 20, 15, 10, 5, 0, 5, 10, 15, 20, 25]

# Favorability Score
favorability_score = [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10]

# Plotting the data
plt.plot(favorability_scores, favorability_ratings, marker='o', linestyle='-', color='blue', label='Scott', linewidth=2.0)
plt.plot(favorability_scores, favorability_ratings, marker='s', linestyle='--', color='red', label='Crist', linewidth=2.0)
plt.xlabel('Favorability Score (1=Lest Favorable)')
plt.ylabel('Percentage (%)')
plt.title('Fig. 1. Favorability ratings.')
plt.legend()
plt.grid(True)
plt.show()
```

\textsuperscript{10} According to the 2010 Florida Senate exit poll, 51 percent of voters who indicated they were “Independent or Something Else,” voted for Rubio, 38 percent voted for Crist, and 10 percent voted for the Democrat, Kendrick Meek (N = 3095 respondents; 36 percent identified as Republican, 36 percent as Democratic, and 29 percent as Independent/Something Else). See the exit poll results at: http://www.foxnews.com/politics/elections/2014/exit-polls?year=2010&type=senate&filter=FL.


Interestingly, although most Floridians were aware of Charlie Crist’s switch to the Democratic Party, Democrats who were aware were much more trusting and considered Crist to be more honest and ethical than Republicans who were not aware of Crist’s switch. By contrast, Republicans who were aware of Crist’s switch were much less trusting and considered Crist to be less honest and ethical than Republicans who were not aware of Crist’s switch. This analysis can be found in Martinez (2015).

In recent memory, there have been some high-profile switches of significant consequence, such as Senator Jim Jeffords’ switch from Republican to independent, which gave Democrats control of the U.S. Senate in 2001 (Nicholson, 2005). And, as Yoshinaka (2012) and McKee and Yoshinaka (2015) point out, a handful of strategically timed switches from Democratic to Republican, altered majority control of several southern legislative chambers. Most recently, in a closely divided U.S. Senate, an arguably serial switcher,\textsuperscript{13} the late Pennsylvania Senator Arlen Specter switched from Republican to Democratic prior to the 2010 election and ended up losing in the Democratic primary to congressman Joe Sestak (Evans et al., 2012).

In the case of Crist, his switch to the Democratic Party was perhaps doubly problematic because he first switched from Republican to Independent expressly to avoid losing to Marco Rubio in the 2010 Republican Senate primary. In other words, the initial abandonment of Crist’s GOP affiliation was clearly done out of pure opportunism, political survival, in his attempt to capture a Senate seat. Hence, the subsequent switch to the Democratic Party most likely drew added skepticism as to the motivation because the first switch from the GOP to Independent was blatantly political. It is true that Crist took some time to “evolve” from no party affiliation to realigning with the Democratic Party, but most political observers saw this as a strategic calculation: a gradual switch would hopefully invoke less derision from the obvious and invariably imminent criticism of the switch being once again a matter of unadulterated opportunism with another election run in the offing.

This study provides another look at the effects of a party switch on mass voting behavior. Similar to Evans et al. (2012), which constitutes one of the rare published articles using survey data to gauge voter responsiveness to a party switch (Specter’s), we also rely on a survey of likely Florida voters in order to determine the

\textsuperscript{13} The late Arlen Specter entered the U.S. Senate as a Democrat and later switched to the GOP and then switched back to the Democratic Party in 2009. See the New York Times article, “Arlen Specter, Pennsylvania Senator, Is Dead at 82”: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/15/us/politics/aren-specter-senator-dies-at-82.html.
effect of Crist’s switch on his 2014 gubernatorial bid. Unlike recent scholarship, however, the Florida case is unique because of the dilemma facing Sunshine State voters: a choice between an unpopular governor and an opportunistic opponent. Of course there are several factors that shaped the outcome of the 2014 Florida gubernatorial election, but we highlight the particular significance of candidate favorability and Crist’s party switch. Before turning to the empirical analysis, we briefly sketch the tenor of the 2014 campaign for Florida governor.

2. Saturated negativity

In the 2014 campaign for Florida governor, the Republican incumbent Rick Scott raised close to $17 million and his party switching Democratic challenger Charlie Crist raised over $15 million. As is true of most high-profile contests, the lion’s share of the money spent went to campaign ads. According to the Wesleyan Media Project, among gubernatorial contests in 2014, Florida led the way with a total of 21,796 ads aired from September 26 to October 9. Within this total, the number of pro-Democratic ads amounted to 8076 with a price tag of $4.9 million. The number of pro-Republican ads amounted to 13,720 with a price tag of $7.4 million. Since the typical ad lasts 30 seconds, from late September through early October, the volume of Democratic ads amounts to approximately 2.8 days of commercials streaming continuously. And in the case of Republican ads, the pro-GOP commercials amount to roughly 4.8 days of consecutive viewings. In short, the Florida voter was inundated with messages emanating from the Democratic and Republican gubernatorial candidates and their supporters.

Not only was the gubernatorial campaign thrust upon Floridians, thanks to the sheer volume of television ads, but both candidates were already almost universally known to Sunshine State residents: Rick Scott by virtue of being the sitting governor, and Charlie Crist by dint of his previous elective service as governor coupled with his well-known switch from Republican-to-Independent Senate candidate in 2010 to Democratic gubernatorial challenger in 2014. Although we have foregone a content analysis (mainly because of the patent face validity of this assertion), the media coverage and the numerous ads we have seen, strongly suggest that the basic strategy for each candidate was to attack the other over their greatest electoral vulnerability (see Martinez, 2015).

Not surprisingly, and as this study contends, this meant Crist going after Governor Scott for his many miscreants that have made him so unpopular. Likewise, Scott repeatedly attacked Crist for switching to the Democratic Party—an act that, according to the Scott campaign, casts serious doubt upon Crist’s trustworthiness since he has been on both sides of numerous issues salient to Florida voters. In terms of overall negativity, the Wesleyan Media Project scored all gubernatorial campaigns over the last two weeks according to three ad classifications: positive, contrast, and negative. At 79.2 percent negative ads, the Florida gubernatorial campaign was the second most negative, barely bested by the Connecticut contest in which 79.5 percent of ads run during the final two weeks were classified as negative. Rather than emphasize the positive features of their own records, both campaigns thought it more prudent to expend the bulk of their firepower on tearing down the opponent. The next section outlines the data and methods we use to assess voter preferences in the 2014 Florida gubernatorial election.

3. Data and methods

The data for this study come from interviews conducted with samples of online panelists of registered Florida voters. Panels came from a pool of Survey Sampling International’s Florida online opt-in panel. In total, 2003 interviews were completed. The survey was in the field (“open”) from October 8—14, 2014. For the analysis presented here, the completed sample was weighted with iterative (raked) proportional fitting on age, sex, and race/ethnicity of Florida voters from the 2014 general election.

Our primary independent variable of interest is a reproduction of the Principled-Opportunism (P-O) Scale developed by Evans et al. (2012). The scale was derived from respondent’s positions on the following four survey questions:

- Charlie Crist makes decisions without regard to his party’s positions.
- Charlie Crist changed parties because he felt closer to the Democrats on issues.
- Charlie Crist makes decisions based on political survival.
- Charlie Crist changed parties in order to get elected.

All four questions ranged from disagree (1), somewhat disagree (2), neither agree nor disagree (3), somewhat agree (4), to agree (5). The scale was constructed by summing the values on the first and second items and subtracting these from the sum of the third and fourth items. The P-O Scale ranged from −8 to 8, with higher values indicating greater political opportunism.

In order to determine the degree to which switching parties may have reduced support for Crist, we estimate a multivariate logit model where vote choice for the gubernatorial contest is the dependent variable. This variable is coded 1 to denote a vote for Crist and 0 equals a vote for Scott or another candidate.

In addition to the P-O Scale, our multivariate vote choice model also includes a number of standard controls. Socio-demographic indicators include Age (in years); Female (0 = male; 1 = female); Income ($1 = less than $25,000; 2 = $25,000–$49,999; 3 = $50,000–$74,999; 4 = $75,000–$99,999; 5 = $100,000–$149,999; 6 = more than $150,000); and Education (1 = less than high school; 2 = high school degree; 3 = some college; 4 = college degree; 5 = post-graduate work). We also include two binary indicators, one for Black respondents and a second for Hispanic respondents. Non-Hispanic whites serve as the excluded comparison category.

Political controls include two dummy variables to measure party identification, Republican and Independent, which are compared to the excluded category for Democrats. The model also includes the standard seven-point ideology scale (Ideology) where higher values

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15 All of the ad data reported in this section can be found online at the Wesleyan Media Project website: http://mediaproject.wesleyan.edu/releases/ad-spending-in-2014-elections-posed-to-break-1-billion.The volume of ads, which party they favored, and their cost, are from Table 5, and the classification of ads (positive, contrast, negative) are from Table 10 (both tables are presented online in the aforementioned URL). The percentage of positive ads run during the last two weeks in the Florida gubernatorial election was 14.7 percent and 6.1 percent were classified as contrast.

16 Interviews were discarded if the survey was not completed, more than 50 percent of the questions were skipped, respondents indicated a birth date after 1996, or respondents were not able to provide a county of residence and other information required for estimation and weighting.

17 Population proportions for the pool of Florida voters in the 2014 midterm were calculated using the Florida voter registration and history databases.

18 The other candidate options were Adrian Wylie (Libertarian), Farid Khavari (NPA), Glenn Burkett (NPA), or some other/write-in candidate. Respondents who indicated they were unsure/undecided were coded as missing.

19 These binary indicators were created from the standard seven-point party identification scale. Independent leaners were coded as partisans.
indicate increasing conservatism and a variable to measure interest in the 2014 campaign (1 = not too interested; 2 = somewhat interested; 3 = very interested). Finally, respondents were asked to separately rate Crist and Scott on the previously mentioned ten-point favorability scale, where a value of 1 is least favorable and 10 is most favorable.

4. Findings

We start with an examination of the distribution of the Principled-Opportunism Scale displayed in Fig. 2. The mean value of .875 falls near the mid-point of the scale. The modal value of 0 characterized almost a quarter (23 percent) of the survey respondents. We should also note that the scale distribution is slightly skewed toward the positive end, with a kurtosis value of 3.22. With respect to respondent perceptions of a party switch, Evans et al. (2012) classified the values ranging from –8 to –2 on the P-O Scale as reflecting principled motivations; while scores from –1 to 1 indicate mixed motivations; and values from 2 to 8 are opportunistic motivations. Using this categorization, the largest share of respondents, 41 percent, viewed Crist’s motivation for switching parties as arising out of political opportunism. Only a fifth (20 percent) of respondents fell into the principled motivation range, with the remaining 39 percent located in the mixed motives category. In sum, four-fifths of survey respondents regarded Crist’s party switch as motivated, at least in part, by political considerations as opposed to a move undertaken out of principle.

Table 1 examines the P-O Scale in light of party affiliation. Not surprisingly, almost two-thirds (65 percent) of Republicans viewed Crist as a political opportunist, with just 4 percent considering it a principled decision. Perhaps surprisingly, only 33 percent of Democrats characterized Crist’s party switch as arising out of principled concerns, whereas over 20 percent viewed the Crist party switch as an act of opportunism. Close to half of independents (47 percent) fell into the opportunistic motivation category, with only 14 percent located in the classification representing principled motivations. The large share of independent Florida voters is one of the primary factors accounting for the Sunshine State’s perennial battleground status in presidential politics since 1992 (McKee, 2015), and also the most important reason why Crist’s party switch might backfire. To the extent that most Democrats and Republicans remained loyal to their respective 2014 gubernatorial nominees, the shift of independents in favor of Governor Scott because they viewed Crist’s switch as a purely opportunistic decision, perhaps best explains the reelection of an otherwise unpopular incumbent.

Table 2 provides ample preliminary support for the contention stated above. The vote for Crist is displayed according to the three categories comprising the P-O scale (principled, mixed, and opportunist) and party identification (Democrat, Independent, and Republican).20 Starting with Democrats, the defection from Crist is of course the least severe in terms of the movement along the P-O scale: going from 96 percent to 60 percent voting for Crist, among those who viewed the switch as opportunistic. Also, as expected, Republicans are least supportive of Crist as they move from the principled (82 percent for Crist) to opportunist category (6.5 percent for Crist). Finally, among independents, the decline in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>P-O Scale</th>
<th>Democrat</th>
<th>Independent</th>
<th>Republican</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principled (–8 to –2)</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed (–1 to 1)</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunist (2 to 8)</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Entries are weighted column percentages.

20 If we do not distinguish vote choice on the basis of party affiliation, then, overall, only a fifth of respondents falling into the opportunist range indicated they planned to vote for Crist, with 80 percent preferring Governor Scott or another candidate. Among those who viewed Crist’s motivations as a combination of principled concerns and political opportunism (the mixed range on the P-O Scale), the vote split 65 percent to 35 percent in his favor. Finally, respondents who viewed Crist’s switch as done for principled reasons were remarkably loyal, with 94 percent voting for him.
Table 3
Predicting the vote for Crist in the 2014 Florida gubernatorial election.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Vote for Crist</th>
<th>Change in probability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principled-Opportunism Scale</td>
<td>-.2278*** (.0586)</td>
<td>.65, .40 [-8 to 8]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>-.5954** (.2663)</td>
<td>.54, .49 [Democrat to Republican]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>-.1975*** (.4376)</td>
<td>.54, .45 [Democrat to Independent]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>-.2228*** (.1026)</td>
<td>.57, .48 [1 to 7]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>.9027** (.5185)</td>
<td>.51, .57 [Anglo to Black]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>.5754* (.3358)</td>
<td>.51, .55 [Anglo to Hispanic]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-.1195 (.1178)</td>
<td>.54, .51 [1 to 5]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>.0303 (.0517)</td>
<td>.52, .53 [1 to 9]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>-.3307 (.2271)</td>
<td>.54, .51 [Male to Female]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.0157 (.0083)</td>
<td>.50, .57 [18 to 91]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest in Campaign</td>
<td>.1723 (.1708)</td>
<td>.51, .53 [1 to 3]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scott-Favorability</td>
<td>-.6863*** (.0707)</td>
<td>.72, .19 [1 to 10]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crist-Favorability</td>
<td>.7984*** (.0829)</td>
<td>.16, .83 [1 to 10]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-.6311 (.7671)</td>
<td>.56, .90 [-9 to 9]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Entries are logistic regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. Dependent variable is coded 1 – Crist vote, 0 – otherwise. Change in probability: Simulated probability of a vote for Crist; comparison values/categories in brackets. 

*p < .10; **p < .05; ***p < .01.

support for Crist is also notably steep. Fully 88 percent of independents who considered Crist’s switch as motivated out of principle, voted for him. But among independents who viewed Crist’s switch as the behavior of an opportunist, the former governor could not even garner 15 percent of their votes—a strikingly low number for a pivotal segment of the Florida electorate.

In order to determine if the P-O Scale will hold up as an independent predictor of gubernatorial vote choice, we specify a multivariate model to explain support for Crist. Our results are presented in Table 3. In addition to the second column that displays the coefficients and corresponding standard errors in parentheses, we have also included a third column that shows the predicted change in voting probability for each independent variable. The Principled-Opportunism Scale is statistically significant and signed in the expected direction. Survey respondents who viewed Crist as having switched political parties for his own benefit were less likely to vote for him. This effect is very robust, even while controlling for a host of other factors, including partisanship and ideology.

Republican identifiers (from .54 for Democrats to .49 for Republicans) and political independents (from .54 for Democrats to .45 for Independents) were significantly less likely to indicate they were voting for Crist. Thus, with respect to party affiliation, the 9-point drop in support for Crist is greater among independents vis-à-vis Democrats. More conservative respondents were much less likely to vote for Crist: going from .57 to .48 along the seven-point liberal to conservative ideology scale. Compared to non-Hispanic whites, blacks (.06 more likely) and Hispanics (.04 more likely) were more supportive of Crist. Older Floridians were also more supportive of Crist; going from a .50 vote probability for the youngest voter to a .57 chance of favoring Crist among the oldest voter. Finally, candidate favorability ratings were closely linked to voting patterns. Those respondents who viewed Crist favorably were more likely to cast a ballot for him (.83 for most favorable to .16 for least favorable), while higher favorability for Scott was associated with lower levels of support for Crist (.19 for most favorable toward Scott to .72 for least favorable toward Scott).

In order to get a visual impression regarding the size of the effect exerted by the Principled-Opportunism Scale, we translated the model coefficients in Table 3 into a set of predicted probabilities.21 Fig. 3 displays the probability of a respondent voting for Crist across the full range of the P-O Scale, from −8 to 8, along with 95 percent confidence intervals bracketing each predicted probability estimate. Again, movement from negative to positive on the scale is an indication that the respondent views Crist’s motives for switching parties as being more politically opportunistic in nature. Looking at Fig. 3, a respondent believing that Crist switched parties based fully on principle (−8) would have a .65 probability of voting for him. On the other end of the scale, a respondent equating Crist’s motives as being fully opportunistic (8) would have a .40 probability of voting for Crist. Across the P-O Scale then, there is a substantial .25-difference in the probability of voting for Crist. This range also crosses the .50-threshold level where one’s predicted vote would shift from Crist to some other candidate in the gubernatorial race.

Fig. 4 plots the effects of Crist’s and Scott’s favorability ratings on the probability of casting a ballot for Crist. These probability plots are virtually mirror images of one another, although the probability range across the Crist favorability rating scale is greater than that for Scott (.67 versus .54). Those respondents who view Crist as more favorable than not (values 6−10) are, not surprisingly, predicted to vote for him. Similarly, respondents who rated Scott less favorable than favorable (values 1−5) were predicted by the model to vote for Crist. We know from Fig. 1 that the bulk of survey respondents (58.5 percent) rated Scott as a five or below and this fact.

21 Predicted probabilities are calculated according to the methodology described in Hanmer and Kalkan (2013).
combined with the electorally detrimental effect of Crist’s party switch, obviously contributed to the closeness of the outcome.

5. Conclusion

The 2014 Florida gubernatorial election was a closely fought and highly negative campaign. Both major party contenders spent most of their energy, time, and message trying to tear down their opponent rather than offer a positive agenda of their own. Because the election was so close, it is true that several factors can help explain why Governor Scott won and Charlie Crist lost. For instance, 2014 was on balance a favorable year for the GOP and hence it is to be expected that in this cycle a Republican would be advantaged — other things equal (see Jacobson, 2015). Beyond a Republican tilt in voter preferences, a short-term GOP bias clearly was reflected in the greater turnout among Republican voters in Florida. Also, compared to the 2012 election, Latino turnout was substantially lower as a portion of the voting electorate in 2014. According to the exit poll for Florida, Hispanics accounted for 17 percent of voters in 2012 versus just 13 percent in 2014, and this estimate is notably lower based on the calculation from the Florida voter file (just 10 percent). Since Latinos in Florida are much more supportive of Democratic candidates, and now even Cuban-Americans lean Democratic in their voting preferences, Crist’s loss could be argued as a simple case of the composition of the voting electorate dooming his comeback bid.

In this study, however, instead of emphasizing short-term political conditions and compositional effects tied to the demography of the voting electorate, we highlight the reality that for a large share of the Sunshine State population the choice for governor constituted a classic dilemma in which one had to choose among the lesser of two evils. On the one hand, the voter had the option of a highly unpopular incumbent governor, who made himself unpalatable primarily because of making decisions and promoting policies opposed by the typical Florida voter. On the other hand, the voter could go with the more affable, former governor Charlie Crist. And yet Crist had a bigger electoral liability than Governor Scott, because his party switch was interpreted by most as an opportunistic strategy to win back his old job. And, as we have shown, Floridians who thought the party switch was done more out of opportunism as opposed to principle, were much more likely to go with the less endearing Governor Scott. In this election it appears that trust (or lack thereof) was on net, a more relevant factor than likeability (or lack thereof). It is hard to argue that voters were unaware of what they would get after enduring four years of a Rick Scott governorship. By contrast, Charlie Crist went from being a Republican to an independent to a Democrat in the span of three years. Hence, it appears the devil known was preferred to the devil in a state of flux.

References

McKee, Seth C., Yoshinaka, Antoine. 2015. Late to the parade: party switchers in contemporary US Southern legislatures. Party Polit. 21 (6), 957–969.

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22 As noted, Republican registration at the time of the election was 35.0 percent, but registered Republicans comprised 42.4 percent of turnout. By comparison, Democratic registration was 38.7 percent, and registered Democrats comprised 38.2 percent of turnout. Although this is admittedly unsubstantiated speculation on our part, it is likely that the presence of a Democratic nominee who once affiliated with the Republican opposition negatively influenced Democratic participation.

23 According to the exit poll of Florida voters, the Hispanic vote went 58 to 38 percent in favor of Crist over Scott; non-Cubans favored Crist over Scott at 66 to 31 percent; Cuban Hispanics split 50 to 46 percent in favor of Crist (see: http://www.foxnews.com/politics/elections/2014/exit-polls?year=2014&type=governor&filter=FL).