

SHORT RESEARCH ARTICLE

Are State Legislative Leaders Moderates?

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ABSTRACT

Spatial models of legislative organization predict that elected leaders will be moderates with respect to their constituency, the party caucus. However, empirical studies of leader positioning in Congress find mixed evidence that this is the case. This paper expands the analysis to state legislatures, using an original dataset of 2056 top chamber and party leaders in 50 states from 1999 to 2023. Simulations reveal that state legislative leaders are consistently moderate relative to their caucus. Furthermore, while Democratic leaders consistently occupy the moderate left side of their caucus, Republican leaders do not show the same pattern, with some even positioned to the left of their caucus median. Beyond this overall pattern, there is substantial variation in leader-caucus ideological divergence. The analysis shows that increasingly distinct and homogeneous majority parties—fulfilling the conditions of conditional party government theory—are consistently associated with leader moderation. However, this effect is stronger for Republicans than for Democrats, which is inconsistent with the theory's predictions of party symmetry. Finally, using a new dataset on majority party roll rates, the spatial divergence of majority party leaders from their caucuses is found to lead to significant failures of agenda control, with a substantial increase in majority party rolls for moderate Republicans but not for Democrats. This finding contradicts the predictions of party cartel theory, which suggests no differences in agenda control based on leader ideology or party. The evidence consistently shows substantial asymmetry between Republican and Democratic leaders.

1 | Introduction

Why do majority parties sometimes choose ideological firebrands to preside over their chambers while at other times they elevate centrists who mirror the middle of the caucus? Answering this puzzle matters because chamber and party leaders wield the procedural powers that determine which ideas receive floor time, how coalitions form, and ultimately which policies become law.

Some brief examples show the breadth of possibilities. In 2015, New York Democrats selected Carl Heastie—one of the most liberal members of their 106-seat caucus—to replace Sheldon Silver, whereas that same year, Arizona Republicans concluded Andy Biggs's tenure as Senate president even though he, too, occupied the far edge of his party's ideological spectrum. Meanwhile, Texas Republicans backed House Speaker Joe Straus, who was to the left of most of his caucus. Yet other chambers in the same session retained leaders positioned almost exactly at the caucus

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median. What accounts for such variation, and what should we expect across the 50 very different state legislatures?

Scholars offer several, partly competing answers. Spatial-voting models depict leadership elections as majority-rule contests inside the party: median members prefer a leader close to themselves, generating the classic *middleperson hypothesis* (Black 1948; Downs 1957). Principal-agent extensions argue that centrists minimize agency slack (Truman 1959; Cox and McCubbins 1993; Aldrich 1995; Sinclair 1998), yet alternative versions emphasize that leaders with agenda control may need to be more extreme to supply party brand cohesion (King and Zeckhauser 2002; Clausen and Wilcox 1987) or that typical leadership selection institutions incentivize extremism (McGann et al. 2002). Conditional party government (CPG) theory predicts the leader-caucus relationship changes based on context: as the majority party grows internally cohesive and externally distinct, members are more likely to select a centrist from the caucus core (Rohde 1991; Aldrich and Rohde 1998).

In terms of empirical evidence, early congressional studies alternated between centrist (Truman 1959) and extremist (King and Zeckhauser 2002; Grofman et al. 2002) findings. However, re-analyses using improved vote-scaling and Monte Carlo methods revealed qualified support for the middleperson hypothesis (Jessee and Malhotra 2010). Finally, there is the question of asymmetry. While theoretical models assume symmetric effects, scholars have empirically found asymmetric polarization in recent decades (Barber and McCarty 2015; Grossmann and Hopkins 2016; Shor and McCarty 2022). Posler and Rhodes (1997) find party asymmetry in the positioning of US House leadership.

State-level scholarship provides additional context. Researchers have cataloged the formal powers and resources leaders wield (Clucas 2007; Mooney 2013b; Fourniaies and Hall 2015; Green 2022), traced how those powers translate into policy influence (Mooney 2013a; Anderson et al. 2016), and documented the national and electoral forces that shape leadership selection (Clark and Little 2002). Yet, despite this extensive work, we still lack consensus on where state legislative leaders sit on the ideological continuum relative to their caucuses and why their positioning varies so widely.

This paper introduces a new dataset of state legislative party leaders and their ideological positioning from 1999 to 2023. I use the dataset to test predictions from three major theories: spatial models, conditional party government (CPG), and party cartel theories. Spatial models expect leaders to gravitate towards the caucus median. Monte Carlo simulations reveal that leaders are mostly moderate on average relative to their party caucuses. Democrats consistently occupy the moderate left of their caucus, while Republicans are less consistent in this regard. With the exception of party asymmetry, these findings largely replicate Jessee and Malhotra (2010). CPG predicts leaders become more centrist as the majority party grows cohesive and distinct. I demonstrate that state legislative majority parties that increasingly fulfill the conditions of CPG theory are consistently associated with more moderate leaders, replicating Rohde (1991) and Aldrich and Rohde (1998), though more so for Republicans compared to Democrats. Finally, party-cartel theory holds that leader ideology should not matter for agenda control, implying

no relationship between divergence and majority-party rolls. Using a new dataset on majority party rolls, I examine the agenda control consequences of leader-caucus divergence. Contrary to that theory, Republican leaders who are more liberal than their caucuses are substantially more likely to oversee rolls than their more conservative colleagues. All in all, the new data allow us to re-examine older theories in a new, data-rich context. The common appearance of party asymmetry is particularly striking.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 introduces the data; Section 3 documents descriptive patterns; Section 4 tests conditional party government; Section 5 examines agenda consequences; and Section 6 concludes with implications for theories of legislative organization.

2 | Data

I collected data on party and chamber leaders in 50 states between 1999 and 2023, classifying each leader as either a chamber or party leader. Chamber leaders are responsible for the operation of the chamber as a whole and are nominally elected by the entire chamber. However, since leadership selection votes are most frequently along party lines, the majority party's prior choice almost always becomes the chamber's choice. In contrast, party leaders are responsible solely to their party caucus and are not subject to a chamber-wide election. This distinction is important, as the differences in responsibilities may call for different types of leaders (Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991).

Not all states have or collate information on the vast array of leadership positions. To ensure comparability, I limited the analysis to the most senior chamber and party leaders, typically including Assembly Speakers, Senate Presidents or Presidents Pro Tempore, and majority and minority party leaders.¹ Lieutenant Governors, who are elected statewide and preside over the upper chamber, were excluded from the analysis. In total, the data collection resulted in 9230 leader-years and 2056 unique major leaders. I then merged the leader data with the Shor-McCarty (Shor and McCarty 2011, 2022) ideology data for party caucuses in each chamber, state, and year.

3 | Leader Centrality

Following Jessee and Malhotra (2010), I distinguish and test two separate hypotheses. The first hypothesis is that leaders are caucus centrists. This is tested by comparing the average absolute distances between leaders and their caucuses (for various leader subsets) with the average difference between a large number of simulated leaders and party medians.

Hypothesis 1. *Leaders are centrist relative to their caucuses as measured by absolute distance.*

The second set of hypotheses relates to whether leaders, irrespective of being moderates, shade towards the predictably extreme side of their party: the left side of the party median for Democrats and the right side for Republicans. This is tested in a manner similar to the first hypothesis, but using signed distances instead of absolute distances.

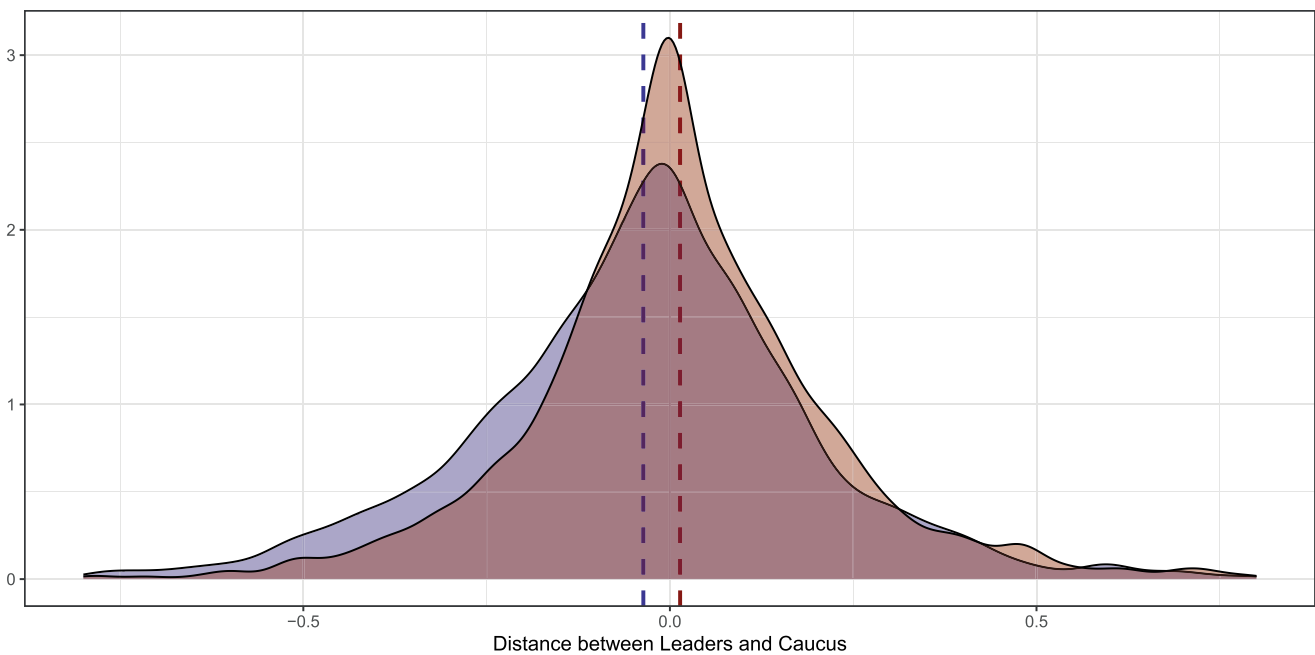


FIGURE 1 | Distribution of leader-caucus ideological divergence. Dashed lines are medians by party.

Hypothesis 2a. *When Democratic leaders deviate from complete centrism, they shade to the left of their caucus.*

Hypothesis 2b. *When Republican leaders deviate from complete centrism, they shade to the right of their caucus.*

3.1 | Exploration

I begin by comparing overall averages for all state legislative leaders to the caucuses they represent. Figure 1 shows a density plot of the difference between leader ideal points and the party caucus in their chamber. On average, leaders hew quite closely to their caucuses. As a point of comparison, the standard deviation of scores among all Democrats is 0.55 and 0.46 for Republicans. Even at this level of aggregation, differences emerge across parties, with Democratic leaders being slightly less moderate than Republicans relative to their caucuses. However, these aggregate differences understate the heterogeneity of leader positioning. Democratic leaders are to the left of their party medians in about 59% and 56% of cases in state Houses and Senates, respectively. Republicans are to the right of their caucuses about 58% and 45% of the time, respectively.

I turn to exploring trends in the data. Figure 2 plots the scores over time and is consistent with well-known trends in state legislative polarization (Shor and McCarty 2011, 2022). Both leaders and caucuses are becoming more extreme over time, and this is true for both parties. It also appears that the divergence between the leaders and caucuses is getting substantially smaller over time.

Disaggregating leaders into *chamber* (typically House Speakers and Senate Presidents) and *party* leaders (majority and minority leaders) reveals some important new details. First, chamber leaders are consistently more moderate than party leaders (relative to caucuses), which does not replicate

the result in King and Zeckhauser (2002). Next, I observe party asymmetry: Democratic leaders lean left more than Republicans lean right, to the extent that Republican chamber leaders in the Senate are as left-leaning as Democrats relative to their caucuses on average. This replicates Posler and Rhodes (1997), who found this form of asymmetry in the US House (see Table 1).

Figure 3 shows these disaggregated differences as time trends. Republican chamber leaders are more moderate than Democratic chamber leaders relative to their caucuses, but this has emerged at different points in time: the early 2000s in the Senate and the early 2010s in the House. Party leaders in both parties and chambers have tended to be more extreme than their caucuses, but there is substantial over-time variation. Finally, Figure 4 illustrates both the centrism and heterogeneity of trends across states in the divergence between leaders and their caucuses. Disaggregating to the state level makes the variability of leader positioning even more apparent, despite the gravitational pull exerted by the center of the party caucus.

3.2 | Simulation Tests

To test the hypothesis that leaders are more extreme than their caucuses, I follow Jessee and Malhotra (2010) in using Monte Carlo simulations. For each leader-year in the data, I select a simulated leader via a random uniform draw from their party caucus and calculate the distance between the hypothetical leader and the caucus median. I repeat this process 5000 times for each leader-year in my data and summarize the results.

Density plots in Figure 5 show the simulated absolute distance draws graphically for party leaders, and Figure 6 shows the same for chamber leaders. The horizontal axis represents distance from zero, with moving rightwards indicating extremism relative to party medians. The average locations of actual

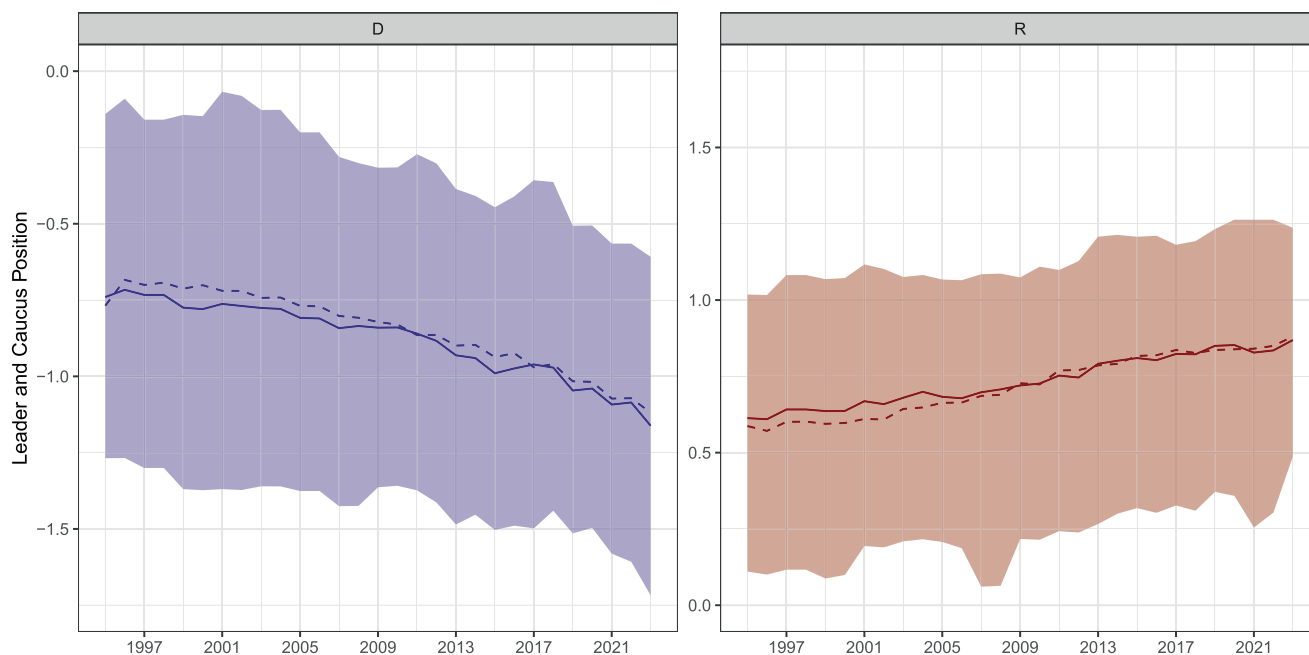


FIGURE 2 | Leadership ideology 80% intervals by party over time. Leader averages are solid line, caucus is dashed line.

TABLE 1 | Ideological distance between leaders and their caucuses.

	Party	Chamber	Party leader distance	Chamber leader distance
1	D	House	−0.050	−0.021
2	D	Senate	−0.040	−0.012
3	R	House	0.049	0.007
4	R	Senate	−0.001	−0.017

leaders are denoted by vertical lines. Each panel includes a *p*-value that summarizes the evidence for the centrism hypothesis.

Both sets of plots and all *p*-values show the same result: actual leaders are much closer to zero than the simulated distributions of leaders drawn randomly from party caucuses. In other words, leaders are essentially moderates, supporting Hypothesis 1. However, it is important to note that this centrism is relative: leaders may still be politically extreme compared to electorates or past leaders, but they are no more extreme than their party caucuses.

Next, I examine the signed hypothesis for leaders disaggregated by chamber, party, and leader type through two sets of tests. Figure 7 shows the simulated draws graphically for party leaders, and Figure 8 does the same for chamber leaders. Each panel includes two *p*-values that evaluate the hypothesis of extremism in the left and rightward directions. A consistent picture emerges from these tests. Upper and lower chamber Democratic leaders are to the left of their caucuses on average, which holds true for both party and chamber leaders. However, the same is not true for Republicans. Upper chamber Republican leaders are consistently tilted to the *left* of their caucuses, and Republican

House speakers appear to lean left as well, although this is not at conventional levels of significance. The only consistent rightward tilt for Republicans is found among House party leaders. These results support Hypothesis 2a for Democrats but not Hypothesis 2b for Republicans.

3.3 | Testing Middleperson Theory

Since American state legislative chamber leaders are elected in a two-stage process, party medians are the relevant benchmark for studying the centrality of chamber and party leaders. With rare exceptions—for example, a conservative Democratic faction in the New York State Senate that enabled a Republican minority to attain control—while there might be minority votes for leader, their support is not pivotal in the sense of electing a minority party leader.²

Nevertheless, the ultimate election is chamber-wide, and minority party votes for chamber leaders are routine in certain states, potentially altering the type of elected leader (Green 2020). Thus, it is worthwhile to describe the centrality of chamber leaders relative to chamber medians. I do so in Figure 9. A few patterns emerge from this analysis. First, leaders are more distant from chamber medians than they are from party medians.³ Second, upper chamber leaders tend to be more moderate compared to lower chamber leaders. Finally, Democrats are systematically more extreme in comparison to their chambers than Republicans.

4 | Testing Conditional Party Government Theory

Leaders are moderate, but they shade in one direction or another and not always in an expected direction. The distance between leaders and the median of their caucuses is quite variable, even if it is small on average. What explains that

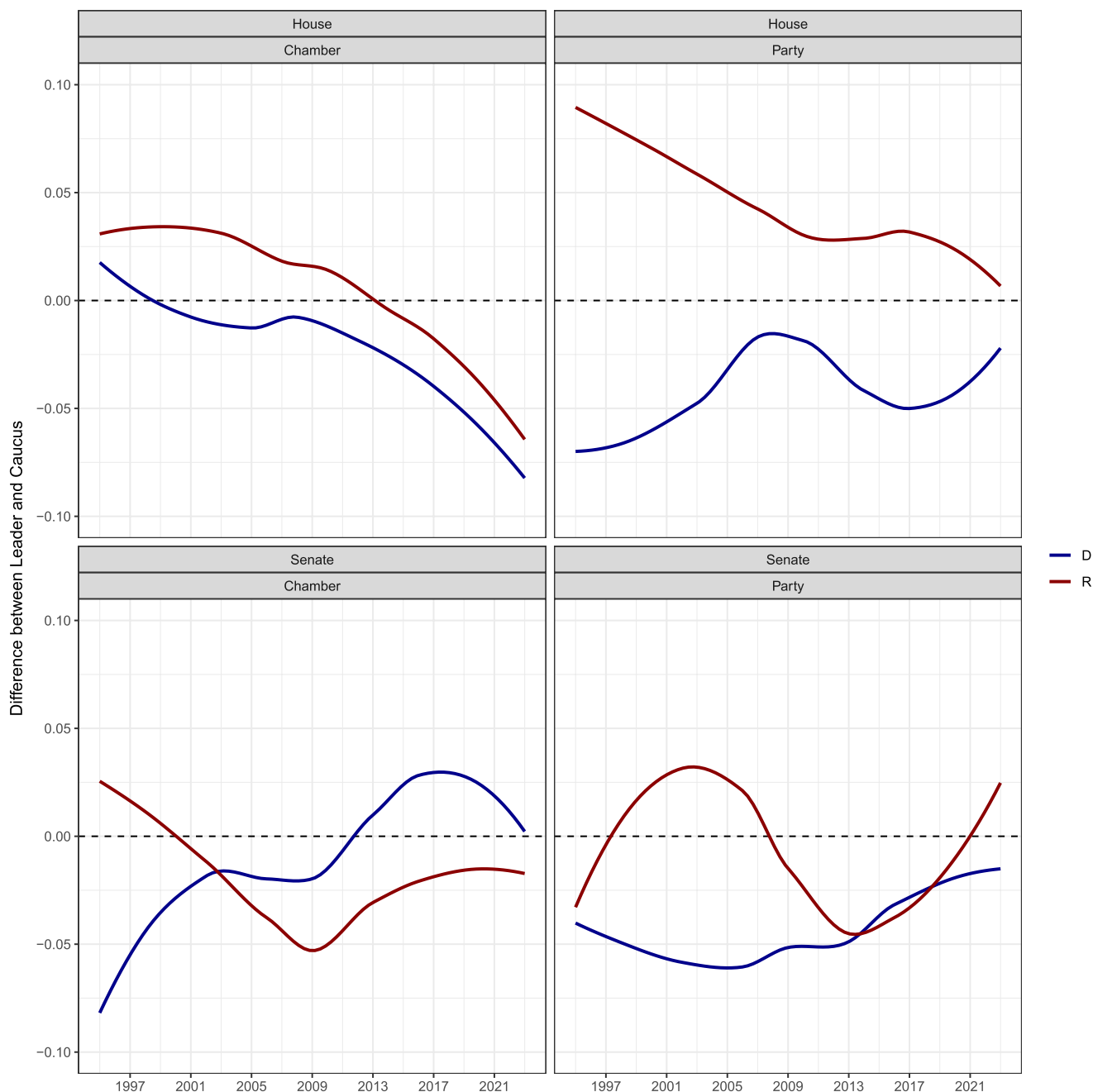


FIGURE 3 | Differences in leadership and caucus ideology over time and party, faceted by chamber (by row) and leader type (by column). Republican chamber leaders are consistently more moderate than Democratic chamber leaders relative to their caucuses.

divergence? I investigate the predictions of the conditional party government (CPG) theory (Rohde 1991; Posler and Rhodes 1997; Aldrich and Rohde 1998; Aldrich et al. 2002). The “condition” in CPG refers to the interparty distinctiveness and intraparty cohesion of the majority party. The theory posits that party leadership would be most active—and responsible—when the condition is increasingly satisfied. A homogeneous party, distinct from the minority party, is predicted to select leaders from the “core” or center of the caucus (Posler and Rhodes 1997).

Hypothesis 3. *Increasingly conditional party government is negatively associated with leader-caucus divergence. A more*

heterogeneous majority caucus and more distinction between majority and minority parties will lead the majority party to elect more moderate leaders (relative to the caucus).

I test this hypothesis in a multivariate multilevel model with the signed distance between leaders and their caucuses as the dependent variable. Thus, positive (negative) coefficients for Democrats (Republicans) indicate lower divergence and greater moderation. The unit of observation is leader-state-year. Varying intercepts are included for states, years, and leaders to account for unmeasured effects that are constant within these categories.⁴ These would account for remaining unmodeled systematic differences at these levels. Separate models by party are run

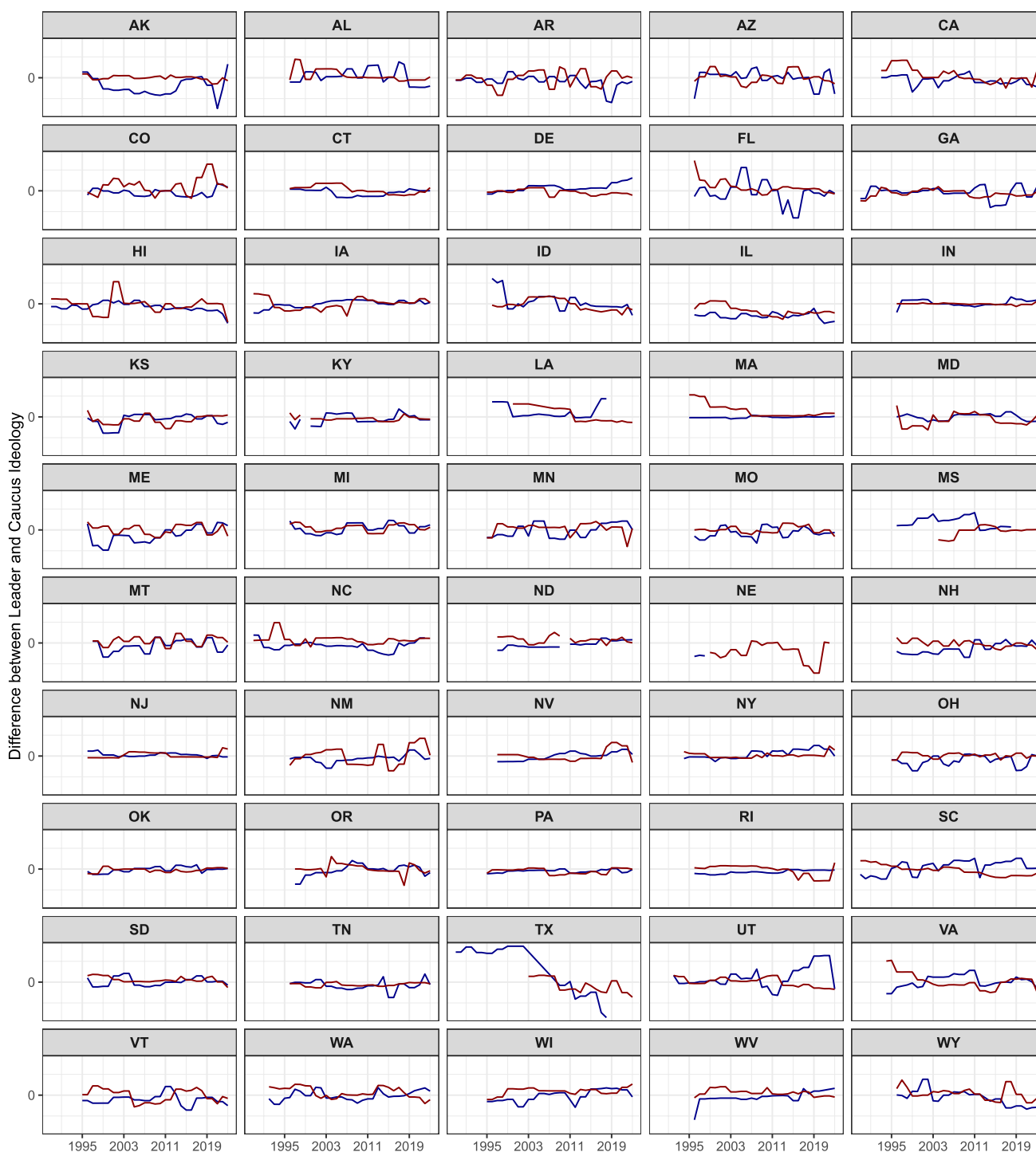


FIGURE 4 | Leadership and caucus ideology trends over time, by party and state.

to account for the fact that leaders might deviate from centrism asymmetrically by party.⁵

The main predictor of interest is the latent measure of *conditional party government*. Derived from Aldrich et al. (2002), this is the first principal component obtained from four underlying measures: interparty difference in median ideal points, the standard deviation of majority party ideal points, the R^2 from regressing ideal points on party affiliation, and the proportion of overlap between the two parties.

An alternative explanation is raised by Green (2020), who points out that the possibility of a cross-party coalition electing a leader is much more relevant in state legislatures than in Congress. Since this coalition contains members of the minority party, it will mechanically moderate the eventually elected leader, even if they are nearly always from the majority party. The key predictor in Green (2020) is *party margin*, the difference in seat share between the majority and minority parties. The prediction here would be that larger margins make cross-party coalitions less relevant, thus allowing

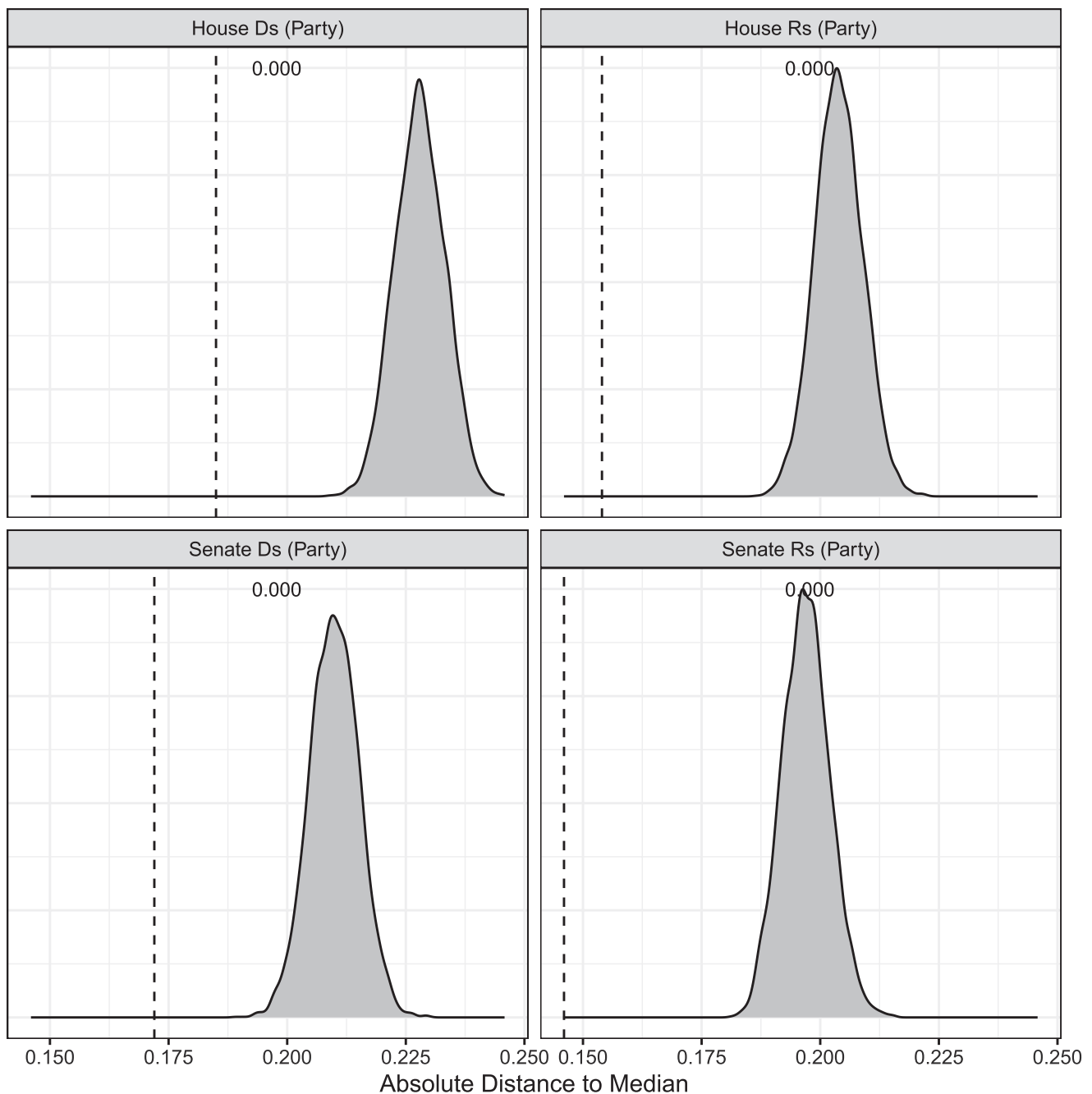


FIGURE 5 | Density plots of Monte Carlo simulated party leaders' distance from caucus medians. Dashed lines are actual average distances. Centrist hypothesis p -value is the upper portion of each panel. Actual party leaders are relative caucus centrists.

leaders to move away from the minority party and become more extreme.

I add four additional controls. The *Party leader* indicator allows for party leaders and chamber leaders to be differently positioned. Chamber leaders have to get legislation past a chamber median significantly more moderate than party medians. This could curb parties' desires to nominate extreme chamber leaders.

Incumbency is likely to insulate leaders from pressures to conform to the caucus. Indeed, long-serving leaders may be bypassed by their polarizing caucus or have the freedom to be more extreme (Hatcher 2010). Thus, I include the *Incumbent*

leader indicator for those with incumbency status in a given state and year.

The imposition of term limits brings substantial changes to the dynamics of legislative leadership within state legislatures. Although term limits can have polarizing consequences (Maskett and Shor 2015), these effects likely influence both leaders and the broader caucus in similar ways. To explain an effect on divergence, we can see term limits as an institution that alters the power balance between leaders and their caucus. Specifically, term limits weaken the authority of majority party leaders because they rely on enduring relationships and the ability to dispense rewards or penalties over time to maintain control (Carey et al. 2006). By capping their tenures, term limits shift power

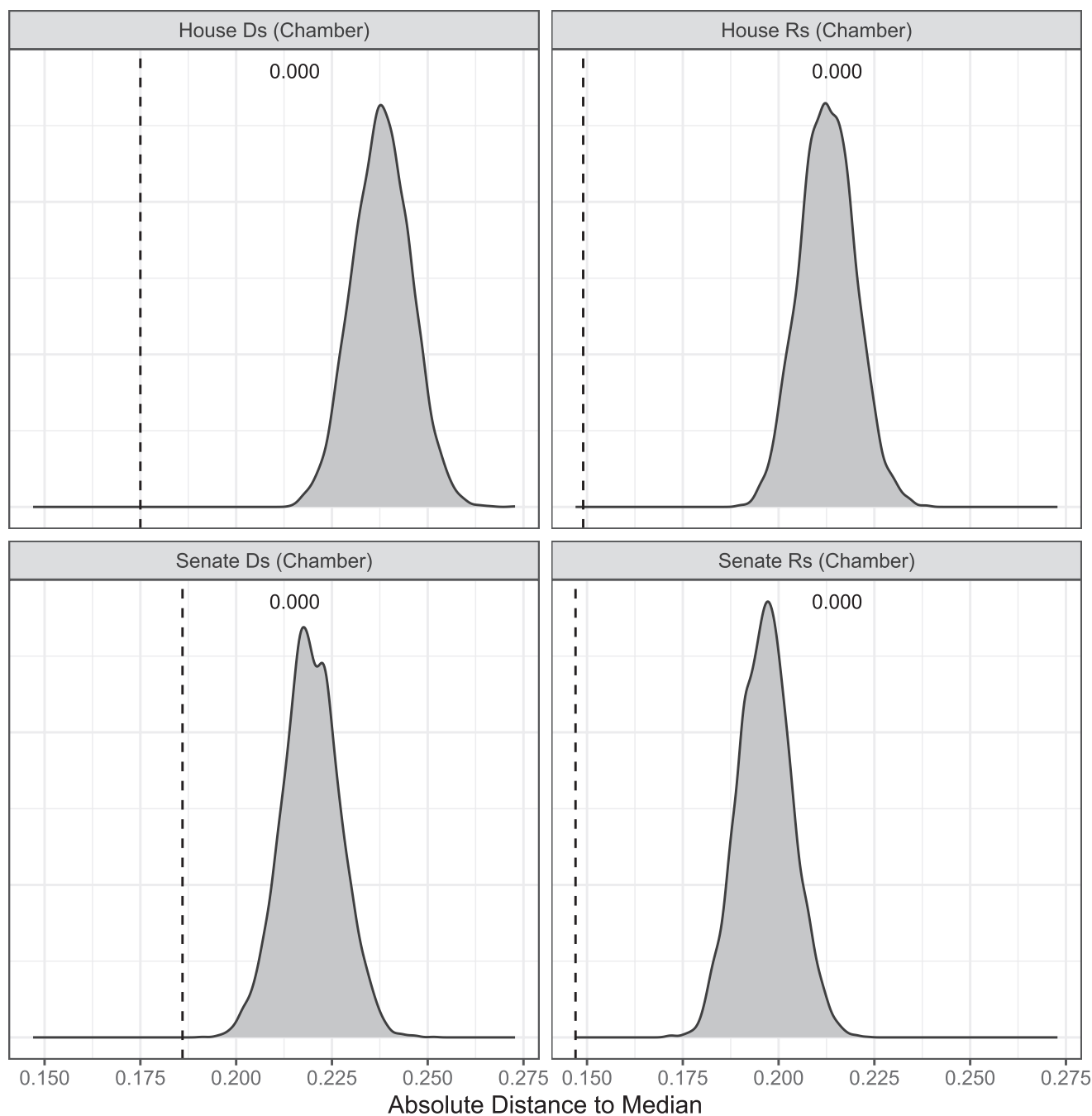


FIGURE 6 | Density plots of Monte Carlo simulated chamber leaders' distance from caucus medians. Dashed lines are actual average distances. Centrist hypothesis p -value is the upper portion of each panel. Actual chamber leaders are relative caucus centrists.

towards rank-and-file members, thus plausibly making leaders more responsive to caucus preferences. Consequently, *legislative term limits* should reduce ideological divergence between leaders and the caucus in term-limited legislatures compared to those without such constraints.

While this paper focuses on internal majority party factions, external factors like executives shape legislative party recruitment and decisions (Masket and Shor 2015), echoing work on Congress (Sin 2014). Either because governors want an easier coordination game inside the legislature or because their state-wide electorate is likely to be more moderate (as opposed to more uniform and extreme legislative districts), they should favor

the selection of leaders closer to the caucus. Thus, *Same Party Governor* (party matching between chamber majority party and governor) should lower divergence.

Table 2 shows the results, which provide support for the conditional party government theory for both Democratic and Republican leaders and replicate the results for Congressional Democrats but not Republicans in Posler and Rhodes (1997). For a more concrete graphical illustration of the effect size, the conditional prediction plot in Figure 10 shows the effect of increasing CPG on caucus divergence, holding the other predictors at their respective means. For both Democrats and Republicans, the substantive size is modest. Relative to the Democratic ideal points in this time period, the

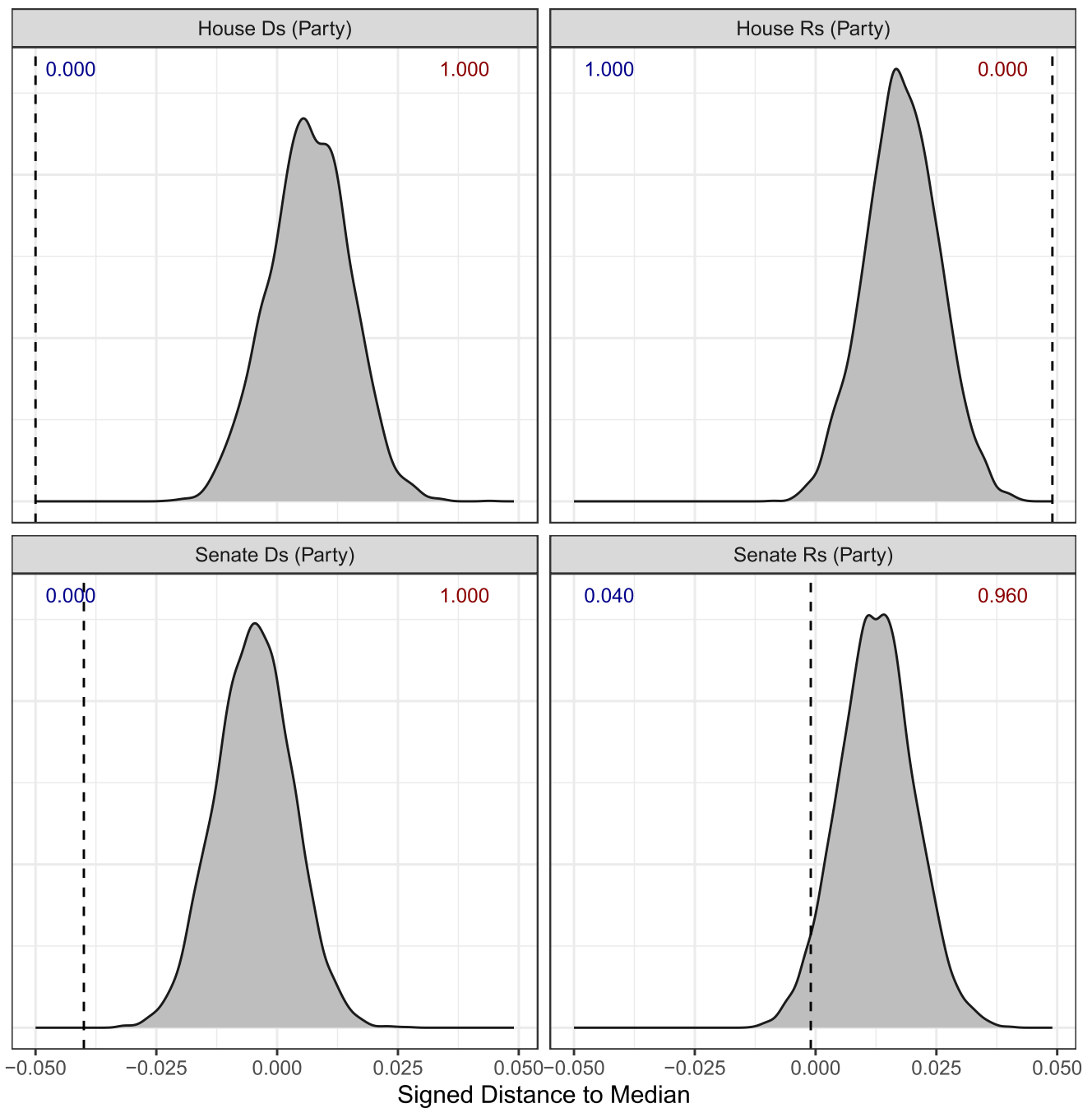


FIGURE 7 | Density plots of Monte Carlo simulated party leaders distances from caucus medians. Dashed lines are actual average distances. Extreme-left p -value is in the upper left, extreme right in the upper right of each panel. Senate Republican leaders are liberal (relative to the caucus).

change from the weakest “condition” (located at the 2.5% percentile) to the strongest (located at the 97.5% percentile) results in a 0.2 SD increase in moderation. For Republicans, the equivalent interval results in a 0.4 SD increase in moderation.

The model also supports the majority party size prediction, though the effect is twice as large for Democrats than for Republicans. Smaller majorities moderate leaders, especially Democrats.

The hypothesis concerning legislative term limits receives partial support. As predicted, term limits significantly *decrease* divergence for Republican majorities, suggesting weakened

leaders align more closely with their caucus. However, this effect was not observed for Democratic majorities. The prediction that party matching between chamber majorities and governors would lower divergence is not supported for either party.

5 | Testing Party Cartel Theory

Does leader divergence have tangible legislative consequences? It could be the case that leader divergence is inconsequential if leaders, under the pressure of reelection, behave *as if* they were moderates. In that scenario, electing extreme or moderate leaders would lead to observationally equivalent behavior. Under

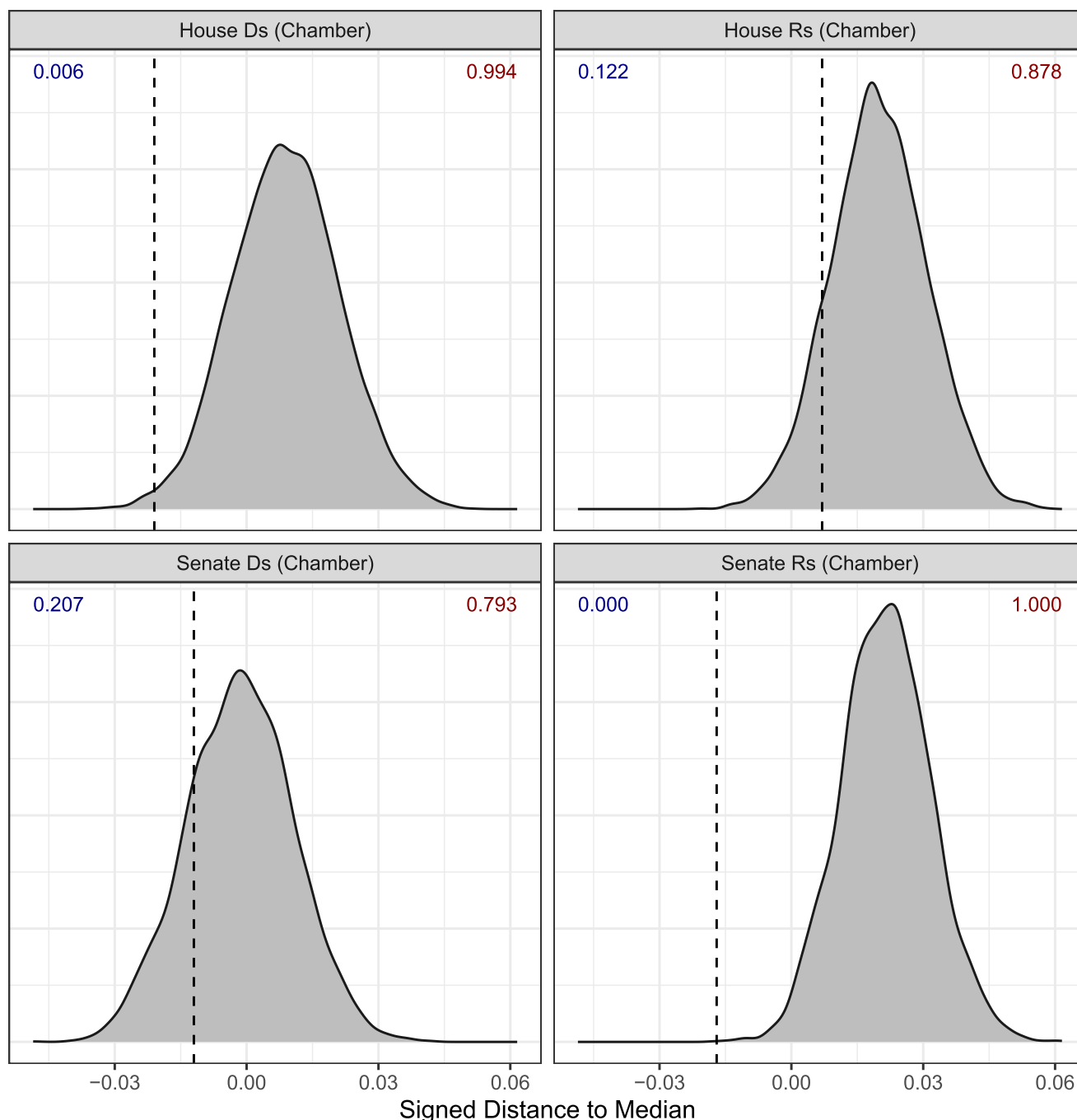


FIGURE 8 | Density plots of Monte Carlo simulated chamber leaders distances from caucus medians. Dashed lines are actual average distances. Extreme-left p -value is in the upper left, extreme right in the upper right of each panel. Senate Republican leaders are substantially liberal (relative to the caucus).

the party cartel theory of legislative organization (Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005), we should not expect differences because the production of collective goods and the maintenance of majority control take precedence over everything else. Members of the majority party caucus could credibly threaten the reelection of wayward leaders who seek to collect ideological or other rents. In turn, leaders act on behalf of members as a procedural cartel and exercise negative agenda control to help produce those collective goods without fracturing the caucus. Finally, cartel theory predicts that we should not observe asymmetry by party in agenda control. Both parties face the same dilemma between private and collective benefits and thus act similarly in seeking to resolve it.

Conversely, leader divergence could systematically exacerbate agency problems. From this perspective, leader discretion allows leaders to take actions that principals would not permit if they were in direct control. However, imperfect monitoring, enforcement, and other transaction costs might provide cover for leaders. Leaders, in turn, could vary in their willingness to allow their party to get rolled. From the leader's perspective, this may have long-term policy or even political benefits, even if rolls impose short-term costs. Of course, there is considerable uncertainty about these downstream consequences, and members may not agree on the tradeoffs that leaders might make. In any case, party asymmetry may well result from systematic

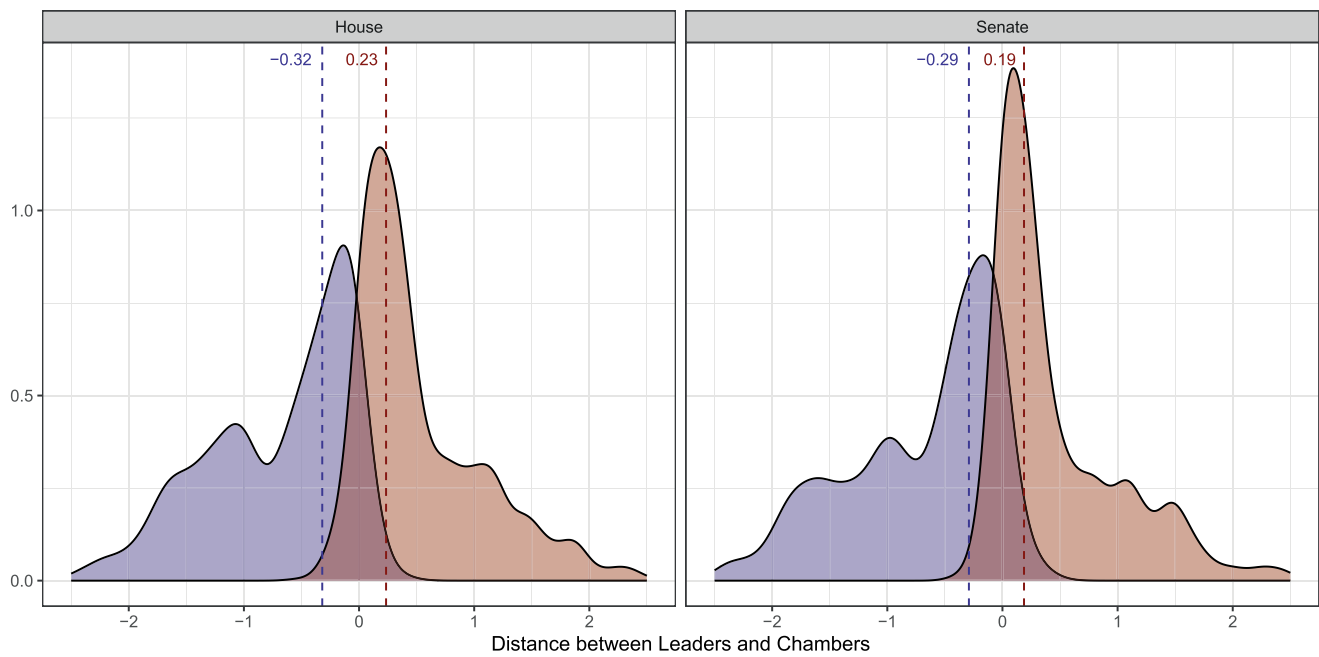


FIGURE 9 | Distribution of leader-chamber ideological divergence. Dashed lines are medians by party.

TABLE 2 | Models of leader-caucus signed divergence.

	Dependent variable	
	Signed divergence	
	D majority	R majority
	(1)	(2)
Party leader	-0.007 (0.004)	0.024*** (0.003)
Conditional party government (latent)	0.286*** (0.035)	-0.495*** (0.042)
Party margin	-0.201*** (0.034)	0.101*** (0.024)
Incumbent leader	0.006** (0.003)	0.001 (0.002)
Legislative term limits	-0.015 (0.015)	-0.039*** (0.008)
Same party governor	0.005 (0.003)	-0.0004 (0.003)
Constant	-0.233*** (0.038)	0.428*** (0.039)
Observations	2398	2776
Log likelihood	2727.007	3391.313
Akaike inf. crit.	-5432.014	-6760.627
Bayesian inf. crit.	-5368.408	-6695.410

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

differences between the parties in terms of these transaction costs or uncertainty about the future.

One prominent legislative measure of the consequences of legislative divergence is the majority party roll rate.⁶ These are roll call votes that pass with the majority of the minority party in support, against the opposition of the majority party. These votes pass because a large enough dissident faction of the majority party joins the minority party in an informal, typically temporary coalition. Under the party cartel theory of legislative organization, we should (a) not see rolls, and (b) there should be no party asymmetry. Leadership exercises negative agenda control to keep these divisive votes from occurring in the first place, and it does so regardless of the party in power.

If leader divergence did have real effects, what kind of leader would be more likely to preside over rolls of her own party? Presumably, it would not be an extreme leader. Rolls are built with the overwhelming (usually unanimous) support of the minority party and a dissident faction of the majority party. If legislative politics are conducted on a single dimension, spatial logic and proximity voting suggest an ends-against-the-middle coalition should be rare. The dissident faction of the majority party should be much more likely to be moderate, that is, closer ideologically to the minority party. This naturally leads to the idea that moderate leaders (relative to their own party) should be more likely to preside over party rolls.

The precise mechanism of this effect is unclear. It could be that moderate leaders simply choose not to engage in costly agenda control when the benefits from doing so are small. Or, intriguingly, it could be that the leaders themselves engineer a roll of their own party on a select number of bills that are personally important to them or, in their perspective, in the long-term interests

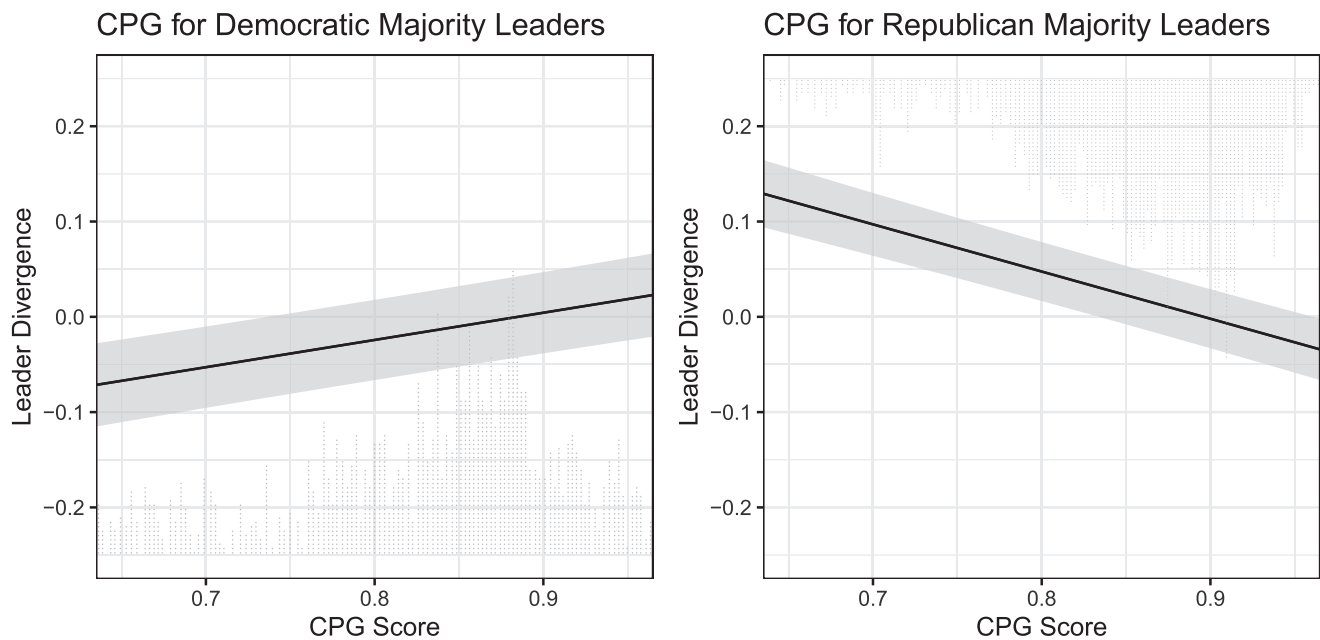


FIGURE 10 | Marginal effects plot of conditional party government on leadership divergence from party caucus. X axis range represents 95% interval of CPG. Plot is faceted by majority party. Dot plot represents a histogram of the distribution of CPG.

of the state or party. In either case, moderates would be most likely to ally with the minority party, explicitly or implicitly.

The following hypothesis expresses the party cartel prediction about leaders and roles.

Hypothesis 4. *Leaders are not distinguished either by spatial location nor by party in their ability to minimize party rolls.*

To assess this hypothesis, I merge new data on roll calls (Shor and Kistner 2023) with chamber leadership data. I aggregate the data to the leader-chamber-year level and derive a panel of roll rates. The principal predictor of interest is *divergence from caucus* (signed). The dependent variable is the *roll rate* measured at the leader-year level. I run separate multilevel models by majority party to test for party symmetry. I include varying intercepts by state, year, and leader, as in the previous model.

I add several additional controls. I include a dichotomous variable for *party leader* to distinguish between leader types since chamber leaders are more likely to have agenda control powers. Second, I include the latent measures of *conditional party government* to account for the independent effect of intraparty and interparty heterogeneity, which would undermine or enhance the ability of leadership to construct procedural and substantive coalitions. I include *incumbent leaders* to capture institutional knowledge about how to avoid (or execute) rolls. Next, I include a control for *same party governor* to account for executive influence on coalition-building. Finally, I include *party margin* since a simple spatial model—absent any majority party agenda control—predicts larger majority parties should be rolled less often (Krehbiel 2007).

Table 3 shows the results. The results are not consistent with the party cartel hypothesis for both the spatial and the party asymmetry aspects. Spatial factors differentiate leaders' ability

TABLE 3 | Models of party rolls at leader-year level.

	Dependent variable	
	Leader divergence	
	D chamber	R chamber
	(1)	(2)
Party leader	−0.00002 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)
Divergence from caucus	−0.0004 (0.001)	−0.016*** (0.004)
Conditional party government (latent)	−0.031*** (0.009)	−0.075*** (0.017)
Party margin	−0.019** (0.008)	−0.112*** (0.011)
Incumbent leader	−0.00002 (0.001)	0.0001 (0.001)
Legislative term limits	−0.0002 (0.004)	0.002 (0.008)
Same party governor	−0.003*** (0.001)	0.001 (0.002)
Constant	0.039*** (0.009)	0.099*** (0.016)
Observations	825	1356
Log likelihood	2640.500	3385.157
Akaike inf. crit.	−5257.001	−6746.313
Bayesian inf. crit.	−5200.416	−6683.766

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

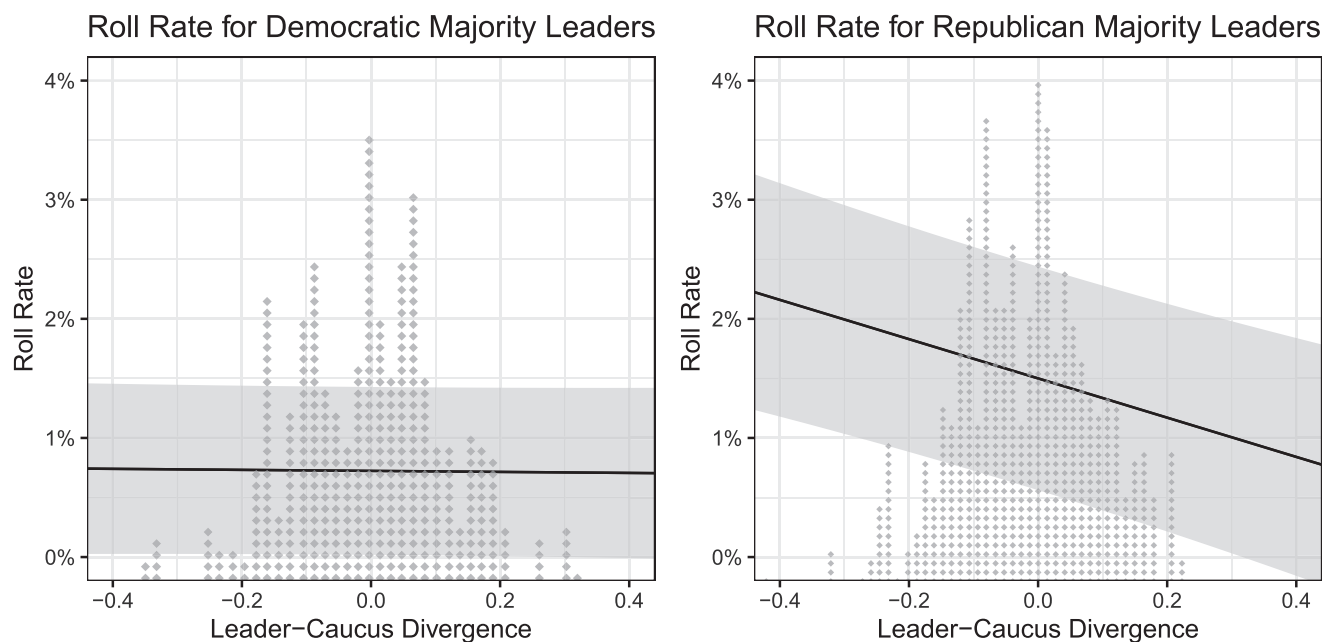


FIGURE 11 | Conditional prediction plot of leadership divergence on party rolls, holding other predictors at their typical values. X axis range represents 95% interval of CPG. Zero divergence indicates leaders at the exact center of their caucus. Dot plot represents a histogram of the distribution of divergence. Plot is faceted by majority party.

to control the agenda, but only for Republicans. The substantial effect, visualized in the marginal effects plot in Figure 11, is considerable. For the most moderate Republican leaders (in the 2.5% percentile), the difference in rolls is approximately *three times greater* than that for the most conservative ones (in the 97.5% percentile). This difference is particularly significant considering the finding, discussed elsewhere in this paper, that moderate Republican leaders are more prevalent than their Democratic counterparts. The party margin and conditional party government controls are statistically significant, while the others are not.

6 | Discussion

These findings strongly support the predictions of spatial models that emphasize the role of caucus centrists in the functioning of modern American political parties in legislatures. On average, state legislative leaders are moderates that orbit the center of their party caucuses. This holds true for both Democrats and Republicans, and for both party and chamber leaders. This replicates the “middleperson” hypothesis (Jessee and Malhotra 2010). However, while leaders generally tend to lean towards the expected ideological direction for their parties, a substantial partisan asymmetry exists in the states. Democratic leaders are less moderate than their Republican counterparts, to the extent that the typical Republican chamber leader, especially in the upper chamber, consistently leans to the left of their caucus. It is important to note that this measure is relative. As polarization increases and caucuses drift apart from each other, leaders may appear to move towards the extremes, even if their relative position within the caucus remains unchanged.

The variation in leader-caucus divergence is partly explained as a function of the distinctiveness and heterogeneity of the parties in the legislature. The evidence shows that increasingly distinct and homogeneous majority parties—which fulfill the conditions of conditional party government theory Rohde (1991) and Aldrich and Rohde (1998)—are consistently associated with leader moderation. This effect is substantially stronger for Republicans, however, than it is for Democrats, which is inconsistent with the theory.

Contrary to the prediction of party cartel theory Cox and McCubbins (1993, 2005), the ideological divergence between leaders and their caucuses has tangible legislative consequences in terms of the procedural power that the majority party can exercise via agenda control. Again, I show asymmetric results by party. In particular, moderate Republican leaders preside over substantially more majority party rolls than their more extreme counterparts. This finding suggests that the dominance of single-party control in state legislatures may be less consequential than we would otherwise predict in a particular context: Republican-controlled chambers that elect moderate leadership.

While the “middleperson” findings of studies based on Congressional history are replicated here, the persistent ideological asymmetry between Democratic and Republican party leadership does not align with conventional models. These models treat parties as mirror images and attribute differences solely to contextual factors. The observed differences between Republicans and Democrats at the state level indicate that these parties may be more fundamentally distinct than previously assumed. These findings warrant further investigation and suggest a need to reevaluate existing theories of legislative organization and party leadership. Future research could explore the

factors contributing to this asymmetry and its implications for legislative processes and outcomes.

Data Availability Statement

The data that supports the findings of this study are available in [Supporting Information](#) of this article.

Endnotes

- ¹ These positions represent nearly 80% of the collected data. The remaining positions, such as whips, floor leaders, caucus chairs, committee chairs, and others, are not consistently available for all 50 states. The online data archive will contain the full data set.
- ² For example, in 2015 Texas House Speaker Joe Straus defeated Tea Party challenger Scott Turner 128–19. See <https://www.texastribune.org/2015/01/13/straus-re-elected-house-speaker-over-tea-party-cha/>. However, only in very unusual circumstances (e.g., minority-majority coalitions) is this support pivotal.
- ³ The density plots show that some Republicans are more liberal and Democrats more conservative than the chamber median. This counterintuitive result is explained by the presence of chambers with few minority party legislators and moderate leaders.
- ⁴ These include institutional differences across states that are constant within the time period (Anzia and Jackman 2013; Jackman 2014), national shocks felt in every state (like federal elections), personality differences that are constant within leaders, and others.
- ⁵ The fixed effects OLS model fit to the same data, shown in the appendix, shows very similar results across coefficients.
- ⁶ Jenkins and Monroe (2016) detail an agenda control typology that include three other measures; these are measured in the state legislative context in Shor and Kistner (2023). However, party rolls are the most common and what I employ here.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.