Out of Step, Out of Party: Party Switching in American State Legislatures*

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Abstract

Do parties influence their members' revealed preferences, or do they merely reflect them? Isolating party effects poses significant inference challenges. Party switchers offer a natural experiment to examine the impact of parties on legislator behavior. This study constructs a dataset of state legislative party switchers from 1974-2024, identifying 532 switches at the state level, significantly more than previous analyses. On average, party switchers move about 0.60 units on the common-space scale, roughly two-fifths of the typical party-median gap. Using comparable ideal point measures, I examine two questions. First, what drives legislators to switch? Ideological misfit is by far the strongest predictor, while district ideology shows no effect. Institutional context matters: conditional party government reduces switching, and minority-party status in lopsided chambers increases it. Second, how much do voting records shift after switching? I find substantial movement, but with important heterogeneity: Democratic centrists shift most dramatically, suggesting they faced the greatest party pressure, while stronger party government amplifies shifts for all switchers.

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"This is a core ideological decision.... And I just fit better with Republicans." – Utah Representative Eric Hutchings

"I used to belong to a Republican Party that was a big tent. It just seemed to me like the party had lost that. I still wanted to be able to reach out across party lines and look at issues individually." – Nebraska Senator Laura Ebke

1 Introduction

Do parties merely mirror legislators' preferences, or do they actively shape them? Some scholars treat parties as epiphenomenal groupings of like-minded lawmakers (Mayhew 1974; Krehbiel 1993), whereas others argue that parties exert decisive leverage over legislative behavior (Cox and McCubbins 1993; Ansolabehere, Snyder and Stewart 2001). Disentangling these views is difficult because partisan affiliation closely tracks revealed ideology and parties dominate the legislative agenda.

Two complementary strategies—measurement-based and design-based—seek to isolate party effects. Measurement strategies benchmark roll calls to external ideology (Ansolabehere, Snyder and Stewart 2001), rescales votes by margin (Snyder and Groseclose 2000), fits party-specific cutting lines (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2001), constructs interest-group indices (Binder, Lawrence and Maltzman 1999), and computes party cohesion (Cox and Poole 2002). Design strategies exploit quasi-experiments in which party pressure shifts exogenously while preferences remain stable—most notably retirements (Jenkins, Crespin and Carson 2005; Rothenberg and Sanders 2000) and party switching (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2001). Because switching—especially during realignments (Aldrich and Bianco 1992)—instantly alters partisan incentives, any ensuing shift in roll-call behavior offers a direct test of party influence: if ideology stays put, parties look weak; if it shifts, they look strong.

Congress supplies only about three dozen post-war cases (Nokken and Poole 2004). This sparse record limits statistical leverage, though the evidence is consistent with strategic calculation: members under electoral threat are more likely to bolt (Aldrich and Bianco 1992; Castle and Fett 2000), while those with progressive ambition view switching as a path to advancement (Yoshinaka and McKee 2019). Cross-national work supports the idea that ideological mismatch encourages switching (Desposato 2006; Desposato and Scheiner 2008; Heller and Mershon 2008), but systematic U.S. tests remain scarce (King and Benjamin 1986).

Once members cross the aisle, their roll-call records almost always migrate toward their new party's median (Oppenheimer 2000; Nokken 2000; Nokken and Poole 2004; Nokken 2009; McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2001; Hager and Talbert 2000). At the ballot box, they pay a penalty (Grose and Yoshinaka 2003).

State legislatures, with thousands of legislators across many institutional settings, provide more switchers and contextual variation than Congress, yet have attracted less systematic attention. Qualitative accounts chart how Southern realignment and the rise of the GOP pulled conservative Democrats across the aisle (Canon 1992; Glaser 1998; Rothenberg 1985) but say little about the individual calculations that prompt a switch. Quantitative work—hampered by the difficulty of assembling comprehensive switching data—focuses primarily on Southern Democrats and finds that progressive ambition, district partisanship, and post-census redistricting heighten switching odds (Yoshinaka 2015; McKee and Yoshinaka 2015; Yoshinaka and McKee 2019).

Switchers likewise incur short-term electoral penalties, much like their congressional counterparts (Yoshinaka and McKee 2019). Ideologically, Glaser (2001) finds only modest post-switch movement based on interest-group ratings whose cross-state comparability is questionable (Snyder 1992; Shor and McCarty 2011). Because almost all of this evidence is drawn from Southern Democrats, we know little about whether the same forces operate for Republican switchers or for legislators elsewhere.[1] These limited samples leave open whether ideological mismatch drives switching—and how far voting records move once legislators cross parties.

I assemble a dataset of 532 state legislative party switchers from 1974-2024, more than triple prior studies. Using ideal point estimates that enable cross-state comparison (Shor and McCarty 2011), I examine two questions. First, I model the individual, district, and institutional factors that predict switching, finding that ideological misfit is by far the strongest predictor while district opinion shows no effect. Second, I estimate how far legislators' voting records move after crossing parties, revealing that behavioral change varies systematically with both individual circumstances and institutional context—with Democratic centrists shifting most dramatically. These patterns demonstrate that parties actively constrain member behavior in heterogeneous ways.

[1]Studies that look outside the South are either limited to a small subset of states (Yoshinaka 2005) or are very out-of-date and missing many switchers (Shor and Tomkowiak 2010).

2 Data

I identify 532 state-legislative party switchers across 49 states from 1974–2024, or 381 after accounting for missing data and the 1993-2023 period of focus. Switchers appear in every region and span all combinations of major- and minor-party transitions. Table 1 shows that the South accounts for the lion's share, the Northeast a distant second, with the Midwest and West trailing.

	D	I	R
Northeast	0.10	0.03	0.08
Midwest	0.05	0.01	0.04
South	0.47	0.01	0.07
West	0.06	0.00	0.06

Table 1: *Summary of party switchers by region, in proportions. Old parties are the columns.*

Switching remains rare: about 0.39% of Democratic legislator-years contain a switch, compared to 0.14% for Republicans. Conditional on switching, Table 2 summarizes partisan direction. The most common move is Democrat to Republican, accounting for 61% of all switchers; the reverse is about a quarter as frequent. Roughly 6% of switchers were Independents joining a major party, whereas 16% left a major party to sit as Independents. Even in the South, 15% of switchers were non-Democrats. Outside the South, moves into the Democratic Party are about as frequent as moves into the GOP. Figure 1 plots the net major-party leaving balance by state.

Next, I merge switchers with legislator-level ideology from Shor and McCarty (2011), updated through 2023 (Shor and McCarty 2022; Shor and Kistner 2023). The dataset includes 24,380 legislators and more than 2,200 chamber-years. Each legislator receives a single career-long score, except party switchers, who obtain separate pre- and post-switch scores. The signed distance between these scores on the Shor-McCarty scale is my measure of ideological change: positive (negative) values indicate movement in the conservative (liberal) direction.[2]

Table 2 also reports ideological movement. Major-party switchers shift by an average of 0.6—substantial relative to a typical party-median gap of 1.4. Switchers move in an intuitive direction: 97% of Republican to Democrat switchers grow more liberal, while

[2]Not all party switchers receive a post-switch score; some switch after the session ends and then leave the chamber, so no votes are recorded in their new party.

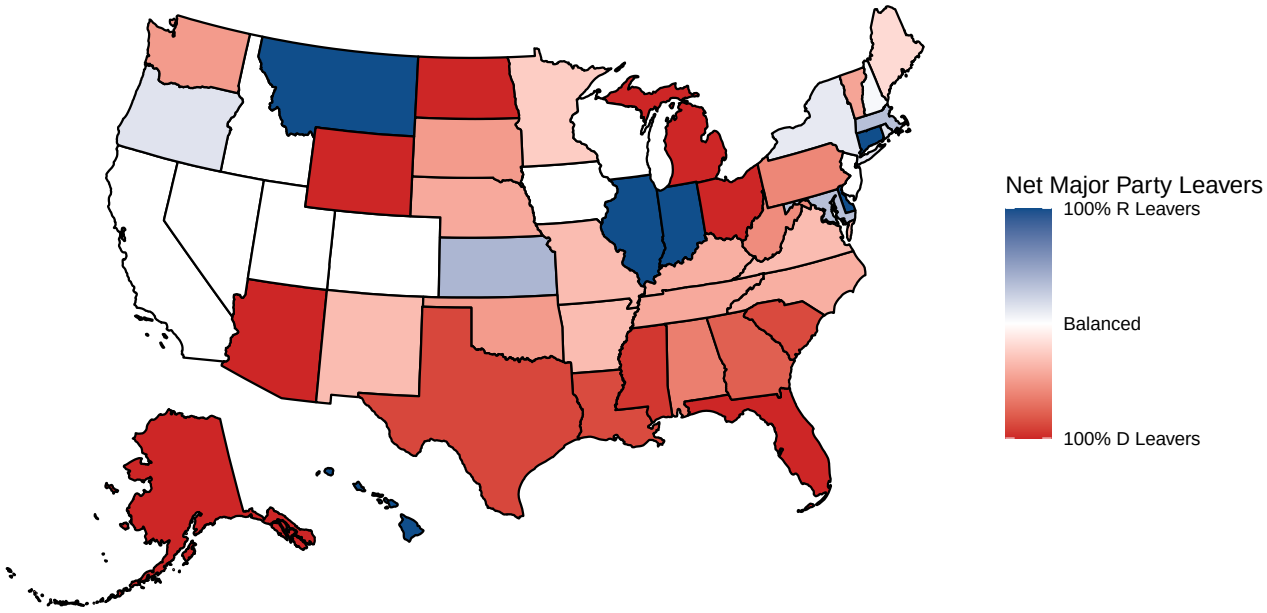

Figure 1: *Net Direction of Major Party Leavers*

94% of Democrat to Republican switchers grow more conservative, echoing congressional patterns (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2001). Democrats (Republicans) who become Independents land ideologically between co-partisans who move all the way to the GOP (Democrats). To provide an intuition about how large these shifts are, I rank-order all legislators within chamber-year, normalize that rank, and compare positions before and after switching. Within-major-party switchers move 0.18 on average on this scale—smaller than the 0.28 reported for Congress (for an earlier period) (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2001).

Table 2: Party Switch Frequency and Ideological Change.

Type of Switch	N	Proportion	Common Space
Within Major Party			
Democrat to Republican	245	0.61	0.58
Republican to Democrat	67	0.17	-0.75
Independent to Major Party			
Independent to Democrat	15	0.04	-0.08
Independent to Republican	8	0.02	0.19
Major Party to Independent			
Democrat to Independent	38	0.09	0.42
Republican to Independent	28	0.07	-0.47

2.1 Monte Carlo Tests

I conduct permutation tests via Monte Carlo simulations to compare party switchers with their old and new parties. I select a simulated switcher via a random uniform draw from the existing party caucus and compute the distance to the caucus median. I repeat this process 10,000 times for each state-chamber-year, which provides a direct diagnostic of whether observed switchers are unusually mismatched.

Figure 2 shows substantial pre-switch misfit: Democratic switchers (blue line) are markedly more conservative than typical Democrats, and Republican switchers (red line) are substantially more liberal than typical Republicans. After the switch, Figure 3 shows that party switchers are still misfits in their new parties, but to a smaller extent. Many Democrat (Republican) to Republican (Democratic) switchers remain left (right) of the Republican (Democratic) center. Nevertheless, party switchers are still modest misfits.

These patterns raise two questions that motivate the remainder of the paper. First, why do ideological misfits switch parties? Second, how do their voting records shift after switching, and what explains variation in the magnitude of these shifts? I develop a theoretical framework to address these questions in the next section.

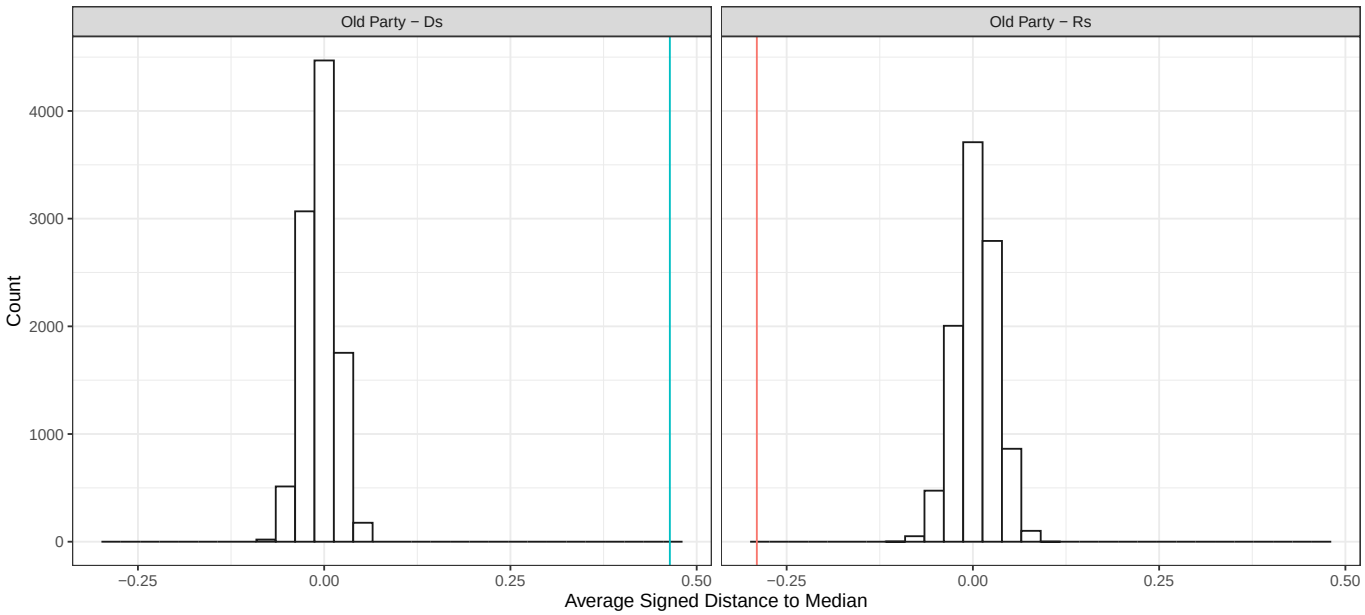

Figure 2: *Monte Carlo simulations for both parties prior to the switch.*

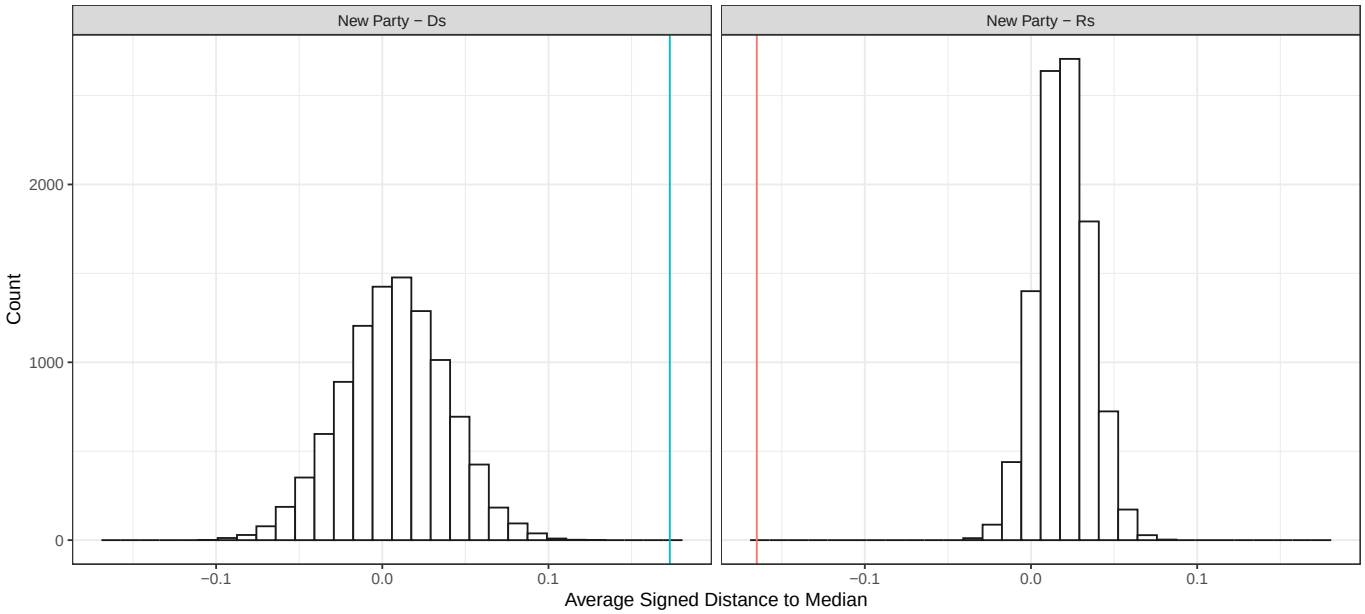

Figure 3: *Monte Carlo simulations for both parties after the switch.*

3 A Theory of Party Switching

Legislators pursue multiple goals that shape their political behavior. While Mayhew (1974) argues that legislators are "single-minded seekers of reelection," Fenno (1973) identifies two additional motivations—influence within the chamber and good public policy—and Arnold (1990) shows how legislators constantly balance these competing demands. Aldrich (1995) demonstrates that parties emerge to help legislators achieve these multiple goals—coordinating action, sharing electoral resources, and building legislative coalitions. Each of these goals can independently drive the dramatic decision to switch parties. Consider three scenarios: an ideologically conservative Democrat may find their party's increasingly liberal positions incompatible with her own. A Democrat in an increasingly Republican district may switch purely for electoral survival. A Republican in a chamber with an entrenched Democratic majority might defect to gain access to committee chairs and legislative influence. When multiple motivations align, the pressure to switch becomes even more compelling.

Potential party switching represents a critical decision point where legislators weigh costs of their current partisan affiliation against uncertain benefits of changing teams. The costs explain its rarity: legislators sacrifice accumulated seniority, abandon donor networks, face potential primary challenges from their new party's loyalists, and risk being branded as opportunists by voters (Grose and Yoshinaka 2003; Yoshinaka 2015). Party organizations and interest group allies withdraw support, and personal relationships dissolve as former allies become adversaries. Unlike temporary defections on individual votes, switching parties is a high-stakes and nearly irreversible decision that fundamentally alters a legislator's career trajectory.

Despite these formidable barriers, the calculus sometimes favors switching when the benefits of staying erode along one or more motivational dimensions: ideological comfort within party, electoral security given district preferences, and institutional advantage derived from majority membership. First, ideological misfits face pressure to support the party line even when it conflicts with their own policy preferences (Canon 1992; Castle and Fett 2000). Outliers marginalized within their caucus have difficulty forming legislative coalitions, attaining desirable committee positions, and securing campaign resources. Second, electoral threats intensify when the party label becomes a liability in the district (Brady, Han and Pope 2007). Third, minority party status constrains influence and resources, limiting their ability to shape legislative outcomes (Cox and McCubbins 2005; Lee 2009).

Parties are not passive observers of potential defection. When parties are internally cohesive and ideologically distinct—the conditions for strong party government—leaders possess enhanced tools to maintain discipline (Rohde 1991; Aldrich and Rohde 2001). Cox and McCubbins (2005) detail some of these mechanisms: committee assignments, floor access, campaign resources, and legislative accomplishments. The value of these incentives varies with competitive context: majority status provides more goods to distribute, making majority members reluctant to switch as their party's margin grows, while minority members in dominated chambers see switching as their best path to influence.

When legislators do switch, the magnitude of their behavioral change reveals the hidden constraints of party membership. The Monte Carlo tests demonstrate that switchers move substantially toward their new party. But if parties exert differential pressure on members, the size of these shifts should vary systematically. Centrist legislators who faced maximum pressure to conform should show larger changes than extremists who were already marginalized. Stronger party government should produce larger behavioral shifts, as more cohesive parties exert greater control over member behavior. By examining both when legislators switch and how much their behavior changes, we can isolate party effects from individual preferences.

These theoretical considerations generate testable predictions about both the incidence of party switching and the magnitude of behavioral change following a switch.

4 The Incidence of Party Switching

Ideological outliers face pressure from their parties while possessing weaker attachment to party goals, making them more likely to switch. Comparative studies in Brazil, Japan, and Italy document such outlier effects (Desposato 2006; Desposato and Scheiner 2008; Heller and Mershon 2008). The logic should be asymmetric: misfits closer to the other party are at greater risk of switching, while those on the opposite flank have nowhere to go. This intuition accords with the rhetoric surrounding switches, as departing legislators often denounce their former party's extremism. The more liberal a Republican—or the more conservative a Democrat—the more likely they are to switch.

Hypothesis 1: *Legislators are more likely to switch the further they are from their party's median on the side closer to the opposing party.*

District misfit, when a legislator represents a district that is ideologically atypical for their party, is another pathway to switching. A Democrat from a conservative district or a Republican from a liberal district faces distinct pressures that compound over time. The party label becomes an electoral liability, making every campaign more expensive and uncertain. Party leaders may withhold resources from what they view as unwinnable seats, while challengers run increasingly credible campaigns. Beyond electoral threats, district misfit creates influence and policy problems: legislators advocating for their atypical districts' interests clash with party priorities, leading to marginalization in resource provision and committee assignments. The pressure becomes self-reinforcing—a conservative district represented by a Democrat remains perpetually competitive, draining resources. Switching parties offers an escape: the district might become safe under the Republican label.

Hypothesis 2: *Legislators are more likely to switch parties the further their district is located from the median of their party's districts on the side closer to the other party.*

Conditional party government (CPG) theory (Rohde 1991; Aldrich and Rohde 1998; Aldrich, Berger and Rohde 2002) suggests that switching should be rarer when parties are internally cohesive and ideologically distinct. Under these conditions, party leaders gain enhanced capacity to shape member behavior through committee assignments, procedural treatment, campaign resources, and leadership positions. For potential switchers, this creates a higher bar to defection. The benefits of staying increase while costs of ideological misfit can be partially offset through selective incentives. When parties are cohesive and distinct, switching requires a larger ideological leap. Thus, strong party government should reduce switching by making party membership more valuable and defection more costly.

Hypothesis 3: *Legislators are less likely to switch parties when interparty distinctiveness and intraparty homogeneity are both high—that is, when party government is stronger.*

Party-system competitiveness should interact with a legislator's status as a majority or minority party member to determine the incentives they face. Majority status brings control over the legislative agenda, committee chairs, and the ability to advance bills, while minority members watch from the sidelines. This implies a large difference in the likelihood of switching between majority and minority members, with the latter much more likely than the former. However, this relationship should be conditional on the seat shares between the parties. When the majority party holds a dominant seat share, the difference in switching likelihood should be at its peak; when the parties are near parity, the difference should be

at its nadir. In closely divided chambers, a single defection might flip control, making both majority and minority members more cautious about switching since the stakes are higher for everyone. When the majority party dominates, only the circumstances facing individual legislators are affected.

Hypothesis 4: *Legislators in the minority party are more likely to switch parties than those in the majority party, and this difference increases as the majority party's seat share grows and attenuates when the parties are near parity.*

I estimate rare–events logistic regression models (King and Zeng 2001) the investigate the incidence of major–party switching.[3] The unit of analysis is the legislator–year. In year t, a legislator who does not switch is coded $y_{it} = 0$; a legislator who switches in that year is coded $y_{it} = 1$. Models are estimated separately by party to allow for partisan asymmetries; switchers are included in the sample for their old party.

Because switching is extremely rare, standard logit can suffer rare-events bias in coefficients and especially the intercept, which understates event probabilities. Rare-events logit (Tomz, King and Zeng 2003) addresses this by implementing bias corrections recommended by King and Zeng (2001), yielding more accurate estimates and predicted probabilities. Unlike prior studies that address rarity by sampling non-switchers (case-control designs), I observe and include the full population of legislator-years.[4] To absorb time-invariant state factors, I include state fixed effects. I cluster standard errors by legislator to account for within-legislator serial correlation.

My measure of legislator party-fit is the signed distance between the legislator's ideology and the chamber party median (the old party for switchers). The ideological party-fit hypothesis predicts that the coefficient should be positive for Democrats (the more conservative, the more likely the switch) and negative for Republicans (the more liberal, the more likely the switch).

To test theories about district matching, I use MRP estimates of district ideology from Tausanovitch and Warshaw (2013). These scores aggregate large-scale opinion surveys to attain sample sizes large enough to estimate preferences by state legislative districts. The

[3] I exclude the very small number of independents who switch, since I am interested in the relationship of legislators to major party caucuses.

[4] As King and Zeng (2001) note, using all available data is ideal when feasible; case-control sampling (Breslow 1996) is driven by cost/efficiency considerations. For comparability with prior work that samples non-switchers, the Appendix reports case-control re-estimations—sampling non-switchers at 3:1, 5:1, and 10:1 ratios—and these deliver substantially similar conclusions to the full-population rare-events logit.

measure is the signed distance between a legislator's district and the median district in the legislator's party. The district party-fit hypothesis predicts that the coefficient should be positive for Democrats and negative for Republicans.

I construct a latent measure of party-government strength following Aldrich, Berger and Rohde (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. I expect the incidence of switching to be lower when this measure indicates stronger party government (greater interparty distinctiveness and greater intraparty cohesion).

To test the hypothesis about majority-party membership and party margins, I include an indicator for majority-party status for a given legislator–year and interact it with the majority party's seat margin. The party margin is defined as the majority's seat share minus 0.5, measured at the chamber–year level; it equals 0 at parity and increases as the majority's seat share grows.

Table 3 summarizes the regression results. The legislator ideology misfit hypothesis is strongly supported for both parties. The further Republicans are to the *left* of their caucus, the more likely they are to switch parties, and the same is true for Democrats and the *right* side of their caucus. Figure 4 illustrates the marginal effects of this variable for both parties while holding the remaining predictors at their median or modal value. Party misfits are increasingly likely to switch sides as the distance between the legislator and their party increases.

By contrast, the district misfit hypothesis finds no support in either party model. This null finding suggests that party switching is driven primarily by ideological misalignment with the party caucus rather than electoral pressures from district ideology. Conditional on their position within their party, legislators in atypical districts are no more likely to switch than those in typical districts.

The coefficient signs align with the conditional party government (CPG) hypothesis for both parties, but statistical significance appears only for Democrats (possibly reflecting the larger sample size). As party government strengthens, the probability that a Democratic legislator switches declines. Figure 5 visualizes this relationship for Democrats.

The model and Figure 6 indicate a significant interaction between a legislator's majority-

Table 3: Switcher Incidence Model

	Democrats	Republicans
Party Ideology Difference	3.67***	−3.08***
	(0.20)	(0.36)
District Difference	−0.42	−0.31
	(0.32)	(0.66)
Conditional Party Government (latent)	−2.60*	−2.14
	(1.07)	(1.77)
Majority Member	0.66*	0.13
	(0.27)	(0.48)
Majority Party Margin	−0.46	0.30
	(1.62)	(2.58)
Majority Member × Party Margin	−9.01***	−7.28+
	(2.38)	(3.79)
Observations	88,934	95,966
RMSE	0.49	0.52
AUC-ROC	0.69	0.61

+ p <0.1, * p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001

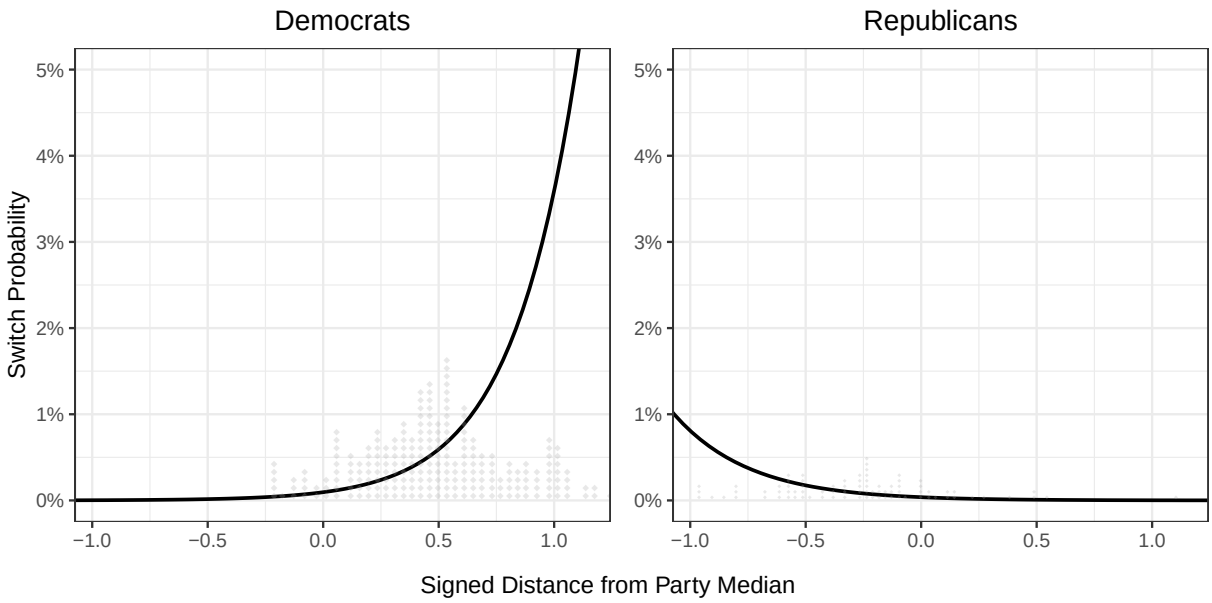

Figure 4: *Predicted probabilities of switching as a function of signed distance from party medians. Republican (Democratic) party switches are more likely at the liberal (conservative) end of their parties. Dot plots are a histogram of the distribution of signed distance for each party.*

party status and the chamber's majority seat margin. For majority-party members, a larger majority margin is associated with significantly lower switching probability, consistent with the claim that secure majorities reduce defections. When the majority margin is slim, majority members' switching probability is highest. By contrast, the majority margin has no statistically significant effect on the switching probability of minority-party members. The implication is clear in the plot: as margins approach parity, switching probabilities converge between majority and minority party members; as margins grow, a wide gap emerges—majority members become very unlikely to switch, while minority members remain relatively more likely to defect. This pattern is consistent with observed defections among minority-party members in states with entrenched single-party control.

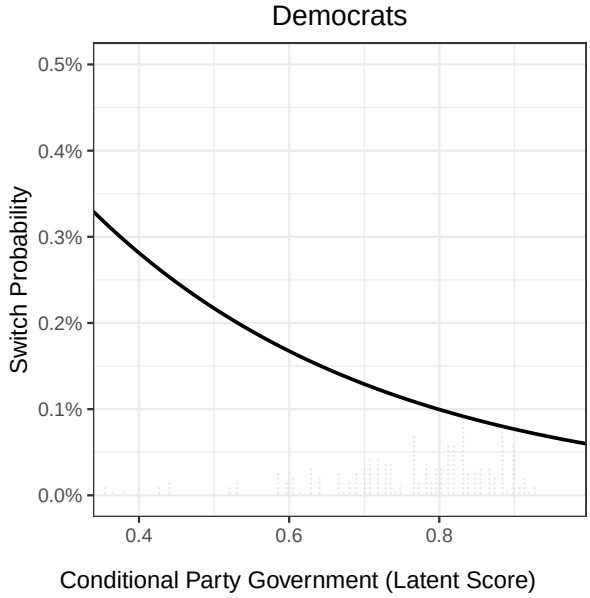

Figure 5: *Predicted probabilities of switching out of the Democratic party as a function of conditional party government. Democratic legislators serving in legislatures which increasingly meet the condition of conditional party government are less likely to switch parties. Dot plots are a histogram of the distribution of the latent measure of CPG.*

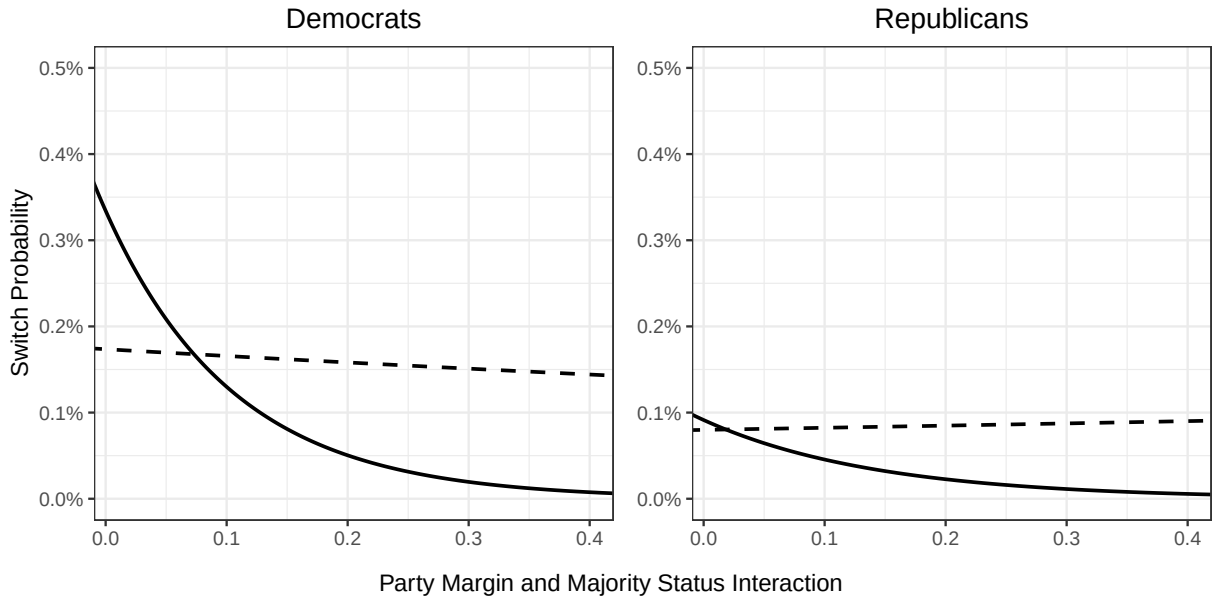

Figure 6: *Predicted probabilities of switching as a function of party margin and majority party membership (solid lines indicate majority party, while dashed indicate minority party). For both parties, as the majority party margin increases, majority members are significantly less likely to switch parties.*

5 The Magnitude of Ideological Change

If parties constrain legislative behavior, then the size of ideological shifts following party switches provides a direct measure of how much pressure parties exerted on individual members. Where party pressure was greatest before the switch, the behavioral change should be largest after the switch, as legislators are finally freed from those constraints. The difference between pre-switch and post-switch voting patterns reveals the hidden cost of party membership—the gap between sincere preferences and party-constrained behavior. Large shifts indicate substantial party pressure; small shifts suggest minimal constraint.

Party discipline operates through the mechanisms identified in our theoretical framework: threats to reelection resources, marginalization from influence positions, and pressure to support party policies. These pressures manifest concretely in party whipping, where leadership works to secure member votes on key legislation—cajoling, bargaining, and threatening to ensure party unity. When legislators switch, these constraints shift to a new equilibrium. Conservative Democrats can more fully express their conservatism once Democratic party pressures are lifted, no longer subject to leadership arm-twisting on individual roll calls. The same is true for liberal Republicans escaping GOP constraints.

Of course, their new party is likely to exert countervailing pressure, but the net change reveals the differential pressure between parties. If parties apply discipline strategically, concentrating enforcement where it is most effective, then centrists closer to their party's median should face greater pressure than extremists who are already marginalized.

Hypothesis 5: *Switchers who were closer to their party's median before switching will exhibit larger ideological shifts than those who were ideological extremists.*

Switchers from districts misaligned with their old party faced both party pressure to conform and constituent pressure pulling in the opposite direction. Once freed from party constraints, these legislators should adjust their voting records to better represent their districts:

Hypothesis 6: *Switchers from districts more ideologically distant from their old party's median will exhibit larger ideological shifts.*

Stronger party government should not only reduce the incidence of switching but also amplify the magnitude of shifts for those who do switch. When parties are internally cohesive

and ideologically distinct, they possess enhanced tools to extract conformity from members. The cost of party membership—visible when legislators escape one party's constraints and enter another's—should be greatest under these conditions:

Hypothesis 7: *Switchers will exhibit larger ideological shifts when interparty distinctiveness and intraparty homogeneity are both high—that is, when party government is stronger.*

Majority-party members face greater pressure to maintain party discipline to preserve their control of the chamber and advance their legislative agenda. This pressure intensifies as the majority party's seat margin grows: individual members become less pivotal to control, their bargaining power decreases, and they face stronger pressure to conform to the party line. By contrast, minority-party members, lacking control over the agenda and outcomes, face less systematic pressure for conformity. Minority parties cannot afford to chase away heterodox members, forcing them to be more tolerant of ideological deviation.

Hypothesis 8: *Former majority-party members will exhibit larger ideological shifts when switching compared to former minority-party members, and this difference will increase as the majority party's seat share grows.*

I model the size of the shift at the legislator–year level using multilevel models with predictors at the legislator, party, and legislature levels. As above, I estimate models separately by (old) party to allow for heterogeneity. The sample is the full population of switchers. The models include varying intercepts for states and years to capture unmodeled influences on the size of the shift.

The coefficient estimates in Table 4 provide strong support for Hypothesis 5 among Democrats: relative party position strongly determines shift magnitude, with a negative coefficient indicating that those further from the party median make smaller shifts. Democratic centrists who switch make the largest ideological moves. For Republicans, the coefficient points in the same direction but does not reach statistical significance. Figure 7 plots the marginal effect of a switcher's prior ideological distance from their party's median on the predicted size of their ideological shift, illustrating the pattern. For Democrats, the negative slope shows that legislators closest to their party's median shift approximately 0.9 points rightward after leaving the party, whereas the most conservative Democrats shift only about 0.4 points. Democratic centrists occupy a vulnerable middle ground where party discipline can be effectively applied—they're close enough to be reachable through persuasion and incentives, yet far enough to require constant management. By contrast, extreme conservative

Democrats may face less pressure because party resources are finite: leaders concentrate their enforcement efforts on the more persuadable center rather than expending resources on entrenched outliers.

Hypothesis 7 receives strong support for both parties: conditional party government significantly increases the magnitude of ideological shifts for Democrats and Republicans. When parties are cohesive and distinct, they extract greater conformity from members—a cost that becomes visible only when legislators escape one party's gravitational pull and enter another's. Figure 8 illustrates the substantive impact of conditional party government on switcher behavior. As CPG increases, Democratic switchers move further rightward when joining the Republican party, while Republican switchers move further leftward when joining Democrats. At low CPG values, switchers change minimally; at high values, ideological adjustments are substantially larger. These patterns underscore that party effects extend beyond individual arm-twisting—when parties are strong and distinct, they create stronger systemic pressures that shape how much members must adapt their behavior.

Hypothesis 6 finds no support: positioning relative to districts does not appear to matter, suggesting that party pressure operates independently of constituency preferences. Finally, Hypothesis 8 finds no support. Indeed, former majority-party Democrats make slightly smaller shifts, contrary to the prediction that majority status intensifies conformity pressure. The interaction between majority status and party margin shows no significant effect for either party.

Table 4: *Switcher Ideal Point Shift Models*

	Democrats	Republicans
	(1)	(2)
Party Ideology Difference	-0.40^{***}	0.15
	(0.06)	(0.12)
Conditional Party Government (latent)	1.05^{***}	-1.20^{**}
	(0.24)	(0.49)
District Opinion Difference	-0.02	-0.05
	(0.08)	(0.27)
Majority Member	-0.12^{*}	0.26
	(0.07)	(0.18)
Majority Party Margin	0.28	0.23
	(0.39)	(0.75)
Majority Member X Party Margin	-0.20	-0.30
	(0.53)	(1.35)
Constant	0.02	0.20
	(0.21)	(0.46)
Observations	262	87
Log Likelihood	-60.64	-51.47
Akaike Inf. Crit.	141.28	122.94
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	176.97	147.60
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

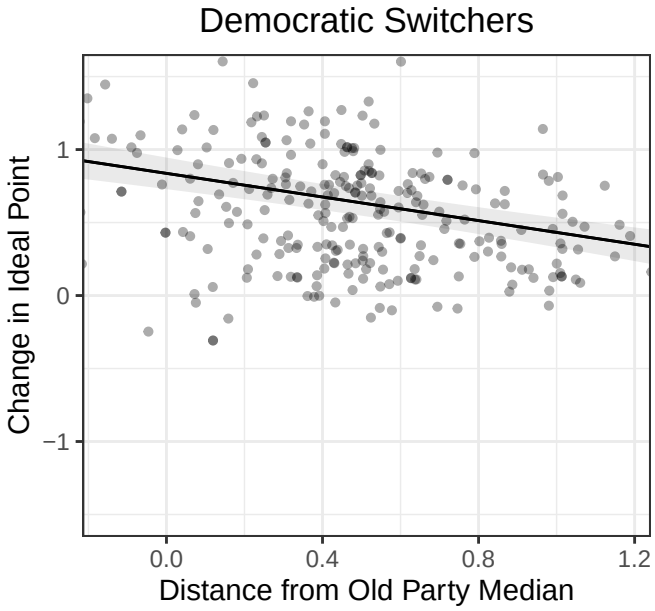

Figure 7: *The predicted effect of signed distance from party medians on the size of the shift in ideal points for Democratic party switchers (raw data is added as dots). The effect is strongest for Democratic centrists.*

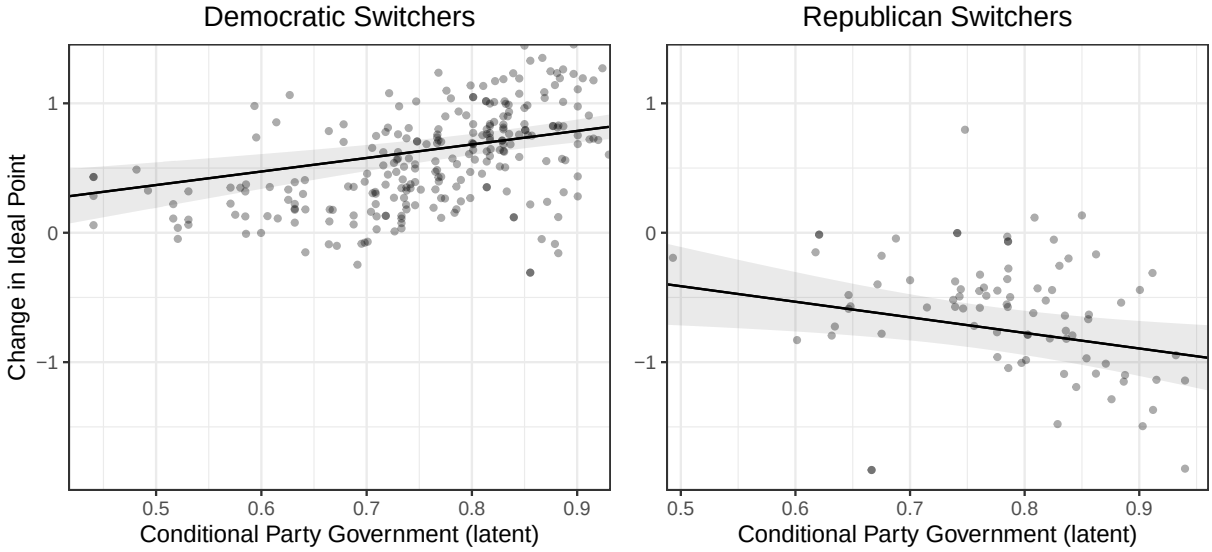

Figure 8: *The predicted effect of conditional party government on the size of the shift in ideal points for party switchers (raw data is added as dots). The effect is similar for both parties: strongest when parties are internally homogenous and externally distinct.*

6 Discussion

Party switching is a rare event among American legislators in the past few decades, yet it offers a glimpse into how individual incentives realign with partisan context. The new dataset assembled here—532 state-level switches in 49 states—confirms that parties reshape legislative behavior. The average switcher moves about 0.60 common-space units, roughly two-fifths of the typical gap between party medians. This dataset opens promising avenues for research that seeks to clarify how legislator behavior varies across institutional contexts and over time.

Legislators who diverge most from their party's ideological center—conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans—are the ones most likely to defect, underscoring the role of ideological misfit in the decision to switch. This is by far the most important substantive predictor of switching. Notably, district ideology shows no independent effect on switching, suggesting that party switching is driven by ideological alignment with the party caucus rather than electoral pressures from constituents. Less important, but detectable, is the influence of chamber context. When a majority party enjoys a large seat margin, its members almost never bolt, whereas minorities in the same setting remain switch-prone; when margins tighten, that majority–minority gap largely disappears.

Once members cross the aisle, the magnitude and pattern of their ideological shifts vary by party. Most strikingly, Democratic centrists rather than conservatives make the largest ideological leaps when switching. This pattern suggests that parties concentrate their discipline where it is most effective: on the persuadable middle rather than on lost causes. Republican switchers, by contrast, shift by similar amounts regardless of their starting position, suggesting more uniform pressure across the caucus.

Party influence also intensifies in the contexts highlighted by Conditional Party Government theory: chambers where each party is internally cohesive and clearly distinct. In those environments leaders possess stronger tools to sanction defectors and reward cooperators,intensifying party influence on behavior and setting a higher bar for those who switch sides. Thus, the ideological jumps made by switchers are correspondingly larger.

These results make clear that parties do far more than mirror legislators' prior beliefs. Party switching functions as a rare natural experiment, letting researchers observe how lawmakers adjust their behavior when they enter a new partisan coalition. The findings support conditional theories of party influence: parties constrain behavior, but the magnitude of that

constraint varies systematically with institutional context and individual circumstances.

These findings have broader implications for understanding contemporary American politics. The rarity of switching and the dominance of ideological misfit as its primary driver suggest that party sorting is nearly complete—legislators who don't fit their party ideologically are scarce. Moreover, among the remaining moderates, the strategic concentration of party pressure on centrists may further contribute to polarization: they face the strongest constraints, discouraging them from building bipartisan coalitions or expressing heterodox views. The phenomenon of party switching illuminates the plight of these party outliers, most of whom never switch but remain constrained within their parties.

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