

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

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Abstract

Do parties shape legislators' revealed behavior, or do they merely reflect it? Party switchers offer a rare opportunity to isolate party effects because the same legislators can be observed before and after crossing the aisle. I assemble a dataset of 528 state legislative party switches across 49 states from 1974 to 2024 and use comparable ideal-point estimates to examine two questions: what predicts switching, and how much legislators' voting records change afterward. Ideological misfit is by far the strongest predictor of switching, while district preferences add little independent explanatory power. Partisan context also matters: switching is less common under stronger conditional party government and more common for minority-party members in lopsided chambers. After switching, legislators move substantially toward their new parties. Among major-party switchers, the average shift is about 0.60 common-space units, roughly two-fifths of the typical gap between party medians. These shifts are largest for party-median Democrats, consistent with the view that they faced the greatest party pressure, and they grow larger in chambers with stronger conditional party government and greater legislative professionalism. The results show that parties constrain legislators' behavior, and that the strength of that constraint varies systematically with party-system conditions, competitive context, and institutional differences.

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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 ideology and parties dominate the 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), limiting statistical leverage. Existing 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 may view switching as a path to advancement (Yoshinaka and McKee 2019). Cross-national work likewise links switching to ideological mismatch (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), though at the ballot box they pay a penalty (Grose and Yoshinaka 2003). State legislatures, with thousands of legislators across many institutional settings, offer not just more switchers but also variation in party systems, competition, and institutional capacity, yet have attracted less systematic attention than Congress. 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 528 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 adds little independent explanatory power. 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 party-median Democrats shifting most dramatically. These patterns demonstrate that parties actively constrain member behavior in heterogeneous ways.

¹Studies 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 528 state-legislative party switchers across 49 states from 1974–2024, of whom 401 have both pre- and post-switch ideology scores. Chamber-level covariates are available from 1993 onward for nearly all states, so the bulk of the analysis covers the 1993–2024 period; a small number of earlier switchers with complete covariates are also included. 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 0.44% of Democratic legislator-years contain a switch, compared to 0.16% 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), as updated in subsequent releases (Shor and McCarty 2022; Shor and Kistner 2023). To enable cross-state and longitudinal comparison, chamber-specific roll-call spaces are bridged into a common scale using candidate responses to Project Vote Smart (PVS) surveys as anchors. While the original 2011 dataset relied primarily on survey waves from the 1990s, the updated data incorporate additional survey waves for more contemporaneous bridging in recent years. For the earlier decades where survey data are unavailable, the common-space estimates rely on traditional roll-call bridging through legislators who served across multiple sessions. 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

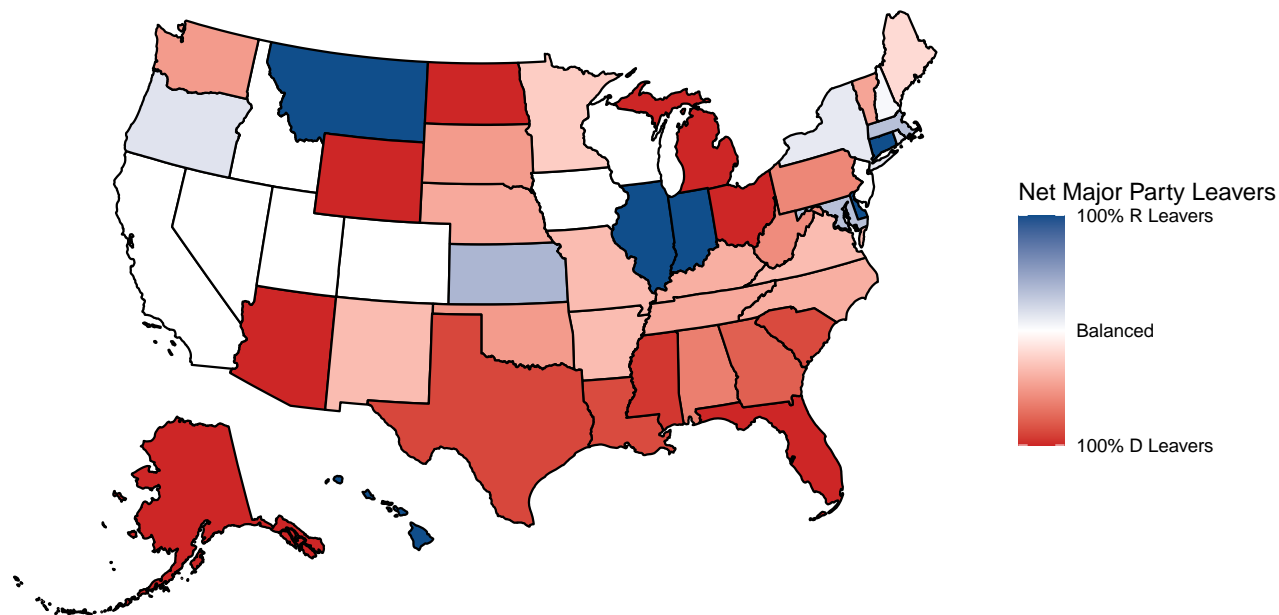


Figure 1: *Net Direction of Major Party Leavers*

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 1.5. Switchers move in an intuitive direction: 97% of Republican to Democrat switchers grow more liberal, while 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

²Not 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.

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	-0.74
Independent to Major Party			
Independent to Democrat	15	0.04	-0.07
Independent to Republican	8	0.02	0.19
Major Party to Independent			
Democrat to Independent	38	0.09	0.43
Republican to Independent	28	0.07	-0.46

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).

2.1 The Partisan-Ideological Context of Switching

To characterize how ideologically unusual switchers are, I compare each switcher’s position to their caucus members in the same state-chamber-year. For each switcher, I compute the share of co-partisans who are at least as ideologically extreme toward the opposing party. The typical Democrat-to-Republican switcher is more conservative than about 91% of their Democratic caucus; the typical Republican-to-Democrat switcher is more liberal than about 91% of their Republican caucus. To visualize these patterns, I construct reference distributions by drawing 10,000 random caucus members per state-chamber-year, pooling across all chambers where a switch occurred.

Figure 2 shows these results. The top row reveals substantial pre-switch misfit: Democratic switchers (vertical line) are markedly more conservative than typical Democrats, and Republican switchers are substantially more liberal than typical Republicans. The bottom row tells the post-switch story. Switchers move toward their new party’s center but do not fully assimilate: about 78% of Republicans are more conservative than the typical Democrat-to-Republican switcher, and about 72% of Democrats are more liberal than the

typical Republican-to-Democrat switcher.

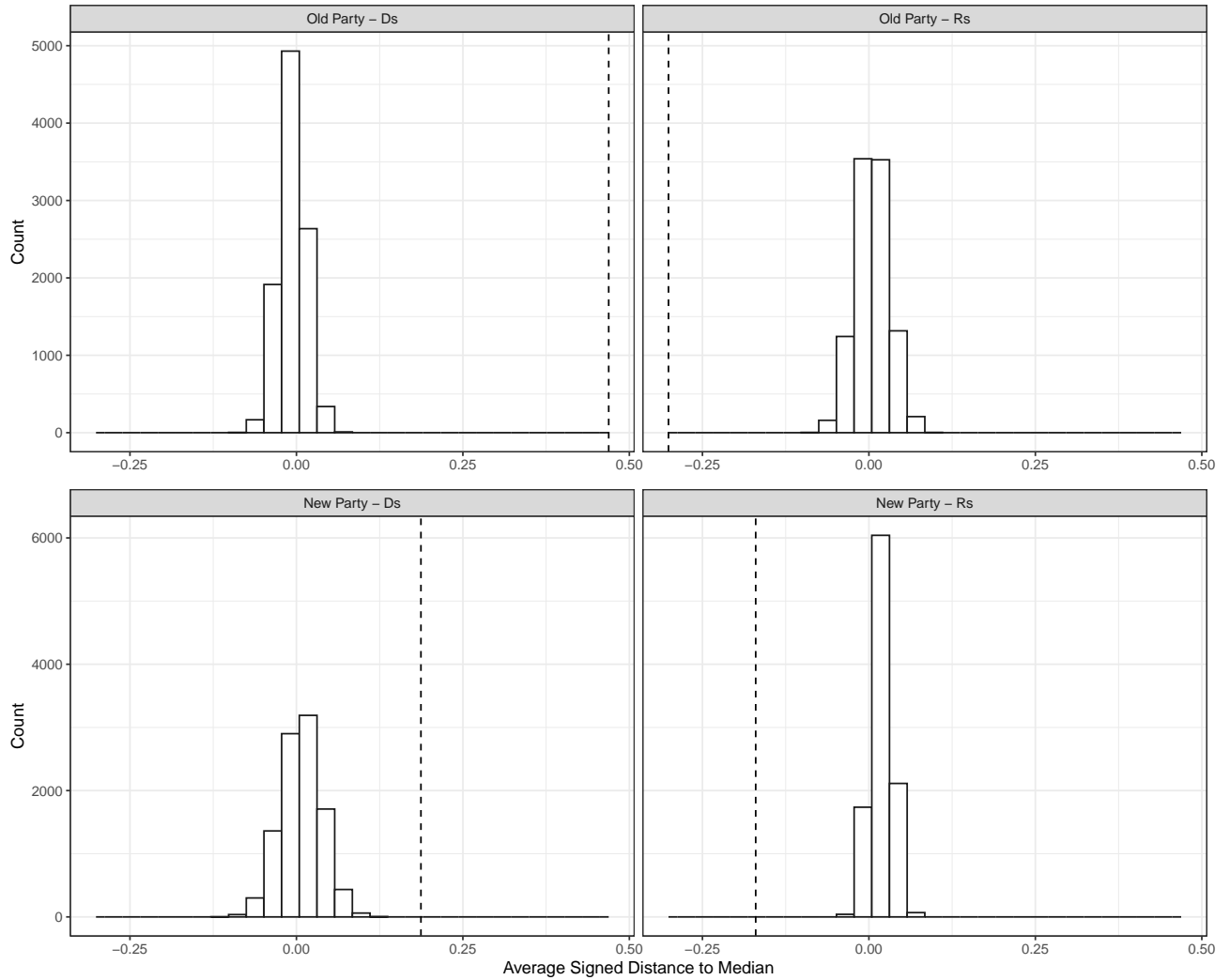


Figure 2: *Distribution of signed distance to party median for switchers (vertical line) vs. random caucus draws. Top row: prior to the switch. Bottom row: after the switch. Switchers are ideological outliers relative to both parties before and after switching, but the gap narrows considerably after the switch.*

These patterns motivate the remainder of the paper: what drives some ideological misfits to switch while others stay, and what explains variation in the magnitude of post-switch ideological shifts? The next section develops a theoretical framework to address both questions.

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, whether it is a conservative Democrat uncomfortable in a liberalizing caucus, a member whose district is moving toward the other party, or a legislator shut out of influence in the minority. 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 suffer. 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. Because the evidence above shows that switchers move substantially toward their new party, the next question is why some move more than others. If parties exert differential pressure on members, the size of these shifts should vary systematically. Legislators closest to their party's median 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.

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.

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.

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) to 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.⁵ 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 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

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

⁴As 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.

⁵Unlike the shift-size model below, the incidence model does not use multilevel random intercepts because there is no standard implementation of multilevel rare-events logit; the `relogit` estimator does not support random effects.

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 3 illustrates the marginal effects of this variable for both parties while holding the remaining predictors at their median or modal value. Moving from the 25th to the 75th percentile of ideological distance from the party median, a Democratic legislator's predicted switching probability increases by a factor of 3.6; for Republicans, the corresponding factor is 2.8. In short, the further from the party center, the more likely the switch.

By contrast, the district misfit hypothesis receives no support. Once legislators' ideological position within their party is taken into account, district context adds little independent explanatory leverage to the switching decision. The estimated district-misfit coefficient runs opposite to the hypothesis for both parties, though only the Democratic coefficient is statistically distinguishable from zero.

The coefficient signs align with the conditional party government (CPG) hypothesis and are statistically significant for both parties. As party government strengthens, the probability that a legislator switches declines: moving from the 25th to the 75th percentile of the CPG index, predicted switching probability falls by a factor of 1.5 for Democrats and 1.7 for Republicans. Figure 4 visualizes this relationship.

The model and Figure 5 indicate an interaction between a legislator's majority-party status and the chamber's majority seat margin, significant for Republicans and marginally significant for Democrats. For majority-party members, moving from the 25th to the 75th percentile of party margin, predicted switching probability falls by a factor of about 2 for

Table 3: Switcher Incidence Model

	Democrats	Republicans
Party Ideology Difference	3.73*** (0.17)	-3.71*** (0.31)
District Difference	-0.61** (0.28)	0.18 (0.55)
Conditional Party Government (latent)	-3.52*** (0.89)	-5.27*** (1.43)
Majority Member	0.25 (0.23)	0.43 (0.39)
Majority Party Margin	-1.89 (1.49)	0.54 (2.12)
Majority Member \times Party Margin	-3.77* (2.10)	-6.75** (3.15)
Observations	86,391	92,429
RMSE	0.45	0.47
AUC-ROC	0.72	0.67

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

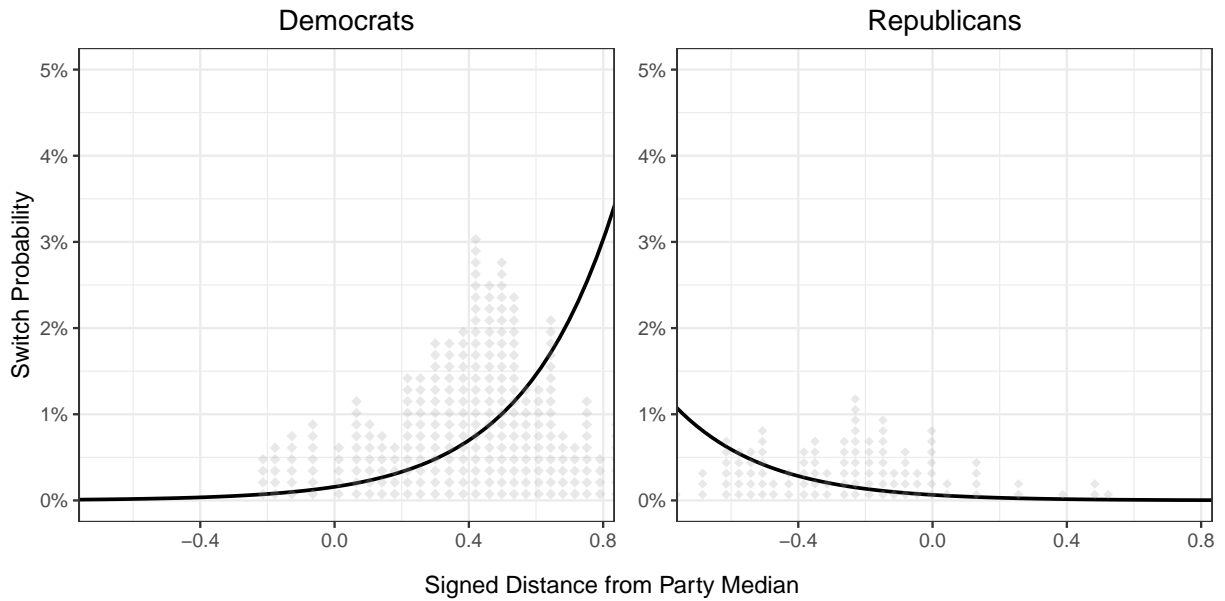


Figure 3: *Predicted probabilities of switching as a function of signed distance from party medians. Republican (Democratic) party switches are more likely at the liberal (conservative) end of their parties. Dot plots are a histogram of the distribution of signed distance for each party.*

both Democrats and Republicans. For minority-party members, the same increase in margin has essentially no effect. When the majority margin is slim, majority members' switching probability is highest. This pattern is consistent with observed defections among minority-party members in states with entrenched single-party control.

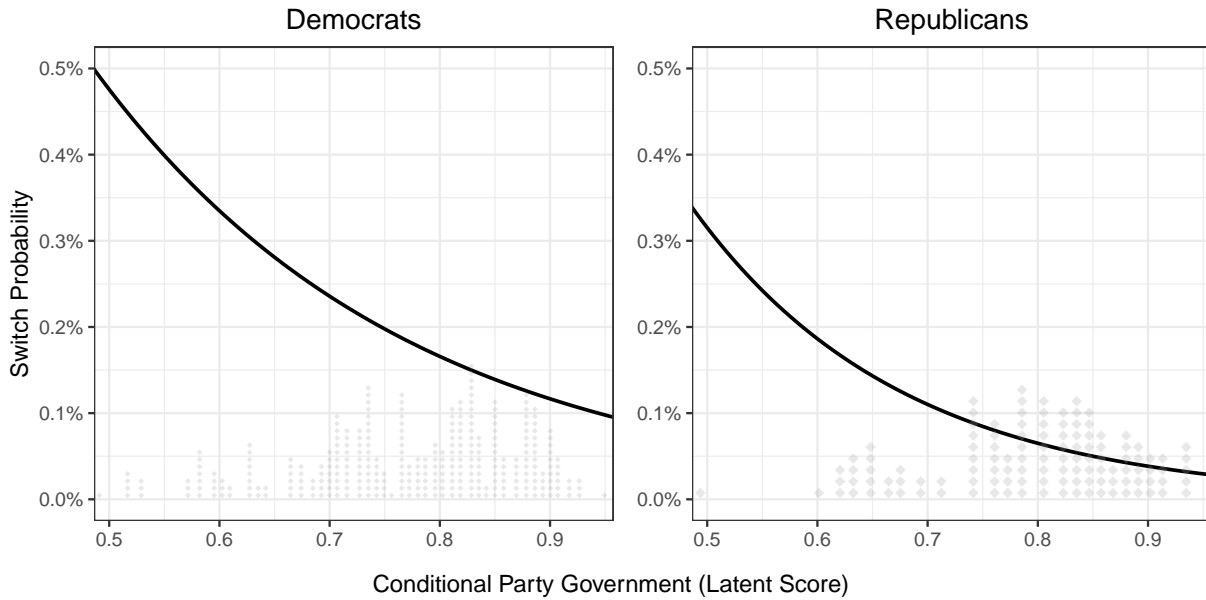


Figure 4: Predicted probabilities of party switching as a function of conditional party government, by party. Legislators serving in legislatures which increasingly meet the condition of conditional party government are less likely to switch parties. Dot plots show the distribution of the latent CPG measure among switchers.

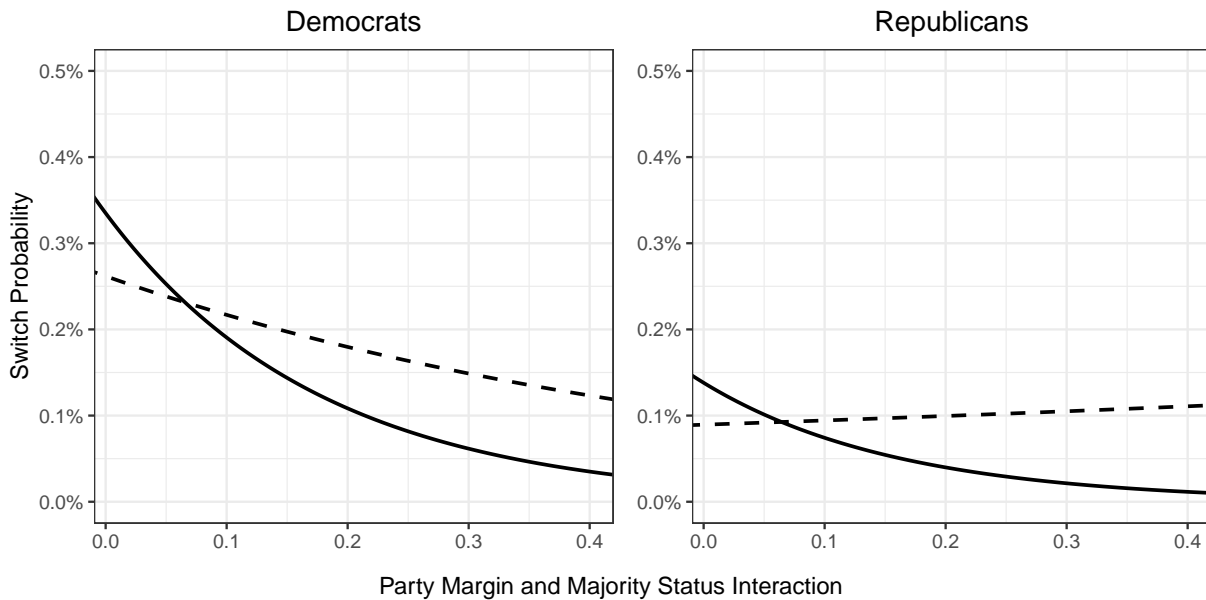


Figure 5: Predicted probabilities of switching as a function of party margin and majority party membership (solid lines indicate majority party, while dashed indicate minority party). As majority party margin increases, majority members in both parties become less likely to switch, though the relationship is stronger for Republicans.

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.⁶

When legislators switch, the partisan pressures they face—whipping, resource allocation, committee assignments—shift to a new equilibrium. Conservative Democrats are freed from Democratic leadership pressure but enter the Republican orbit; liberal Republicans experience the mirror image. The net change in behavior thus reveals the differential pressure between the old and new parties. If parties apply discipline strategically, concentrating enforcement where it is most effective, then legislators 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:

⁶Issue surveys like the NPAT would be useful for separating preference change from roll-call adjustment, but in this setting they typically provide only a single observation per legislator rather than repeated pre- and post-switch measures.

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

The institutional capacity of a legislature should also condition the magnitude of post-switch adjustment. Professional legislatures—those with greater resources per member in terms of staff, research capacity, and organizational infrastructure—provide parties with more tools to enforce conformity and socialize new members. Before switching, members in professionalized legislatures were held more tightly to their old party’s line, suppressing the expression of their underlying preferences. After switching, the new caucus has equally strong tools to pull them toward its median. The combination of release from one disciplinary environment and entry into another should produce larger ideological shifts in more professionalized settings:

Hypothesis 8: *Switchers in more professionalized legislatures will exhibit larger ideological shifts toward their new party.*

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 9: *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. To operationalize legislative professionalism, I follow Brown and Mitchell (2025)’s recommendation to use the log of real legislative operating expenditures per seat (in 2020 dollars) rather than Squire’s (1992) index or Bowen and Greene’s (2014) MDS scaling, both of which suffer from limited temporal coverage and outlier sensitivity that can distort

longitudinal estimates. Expenditures are available annually from the Census Bureau for all 50 states with no missingness.

The coefficient estimates in Table 4 provide strong support for Hypothesis 5 among Democrats: relative party position strongly determines shift magnitude, with those further from the party median making smaller shifts. Party-median Democrats who switch make the largest ideological moves. For Republicans, the coefficient points in the same direction but does not reach statistical significance. Figure 6 illustrates the pattern. For Democrats, the negative slope shows that legislators closest to their party’s median shift roughly 0.8 points rightward after leaving the party, whereas the most conservative Democrats shift only about 0.3 points. Party-median Democrats 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.⁷

Hypothesis 7 receives strong support for both parties: conditional party government significantly increases the magnitude of ideological shifts for both Democrats and Republicans. Moving from the 25th to the 75th percentile of CPG within each party’s sample predicts an additional 0.13-point rightward shift for Democratic switchers and an additional 0.14-point leftward shift for 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 7 illustrates this pattern: at low CPG values, switchers change minimally; at high values, ideological adjustments are substantially larger.

Hypothesis 8 also receives strong support: legislative professionalism significantly conditions the magnitude of post-switch ideological adjustment, with symmetric effects across parties. In more professionalized legislatures, Democratic switchers shift further rightward and Republican switchers further leftward. An interquartile-range increase in log expenditures per seat (roughly the difference between a state like Mississippi and one like Louisiana) predicts an additional 0.12-point rightward shift for Democrats and an additional 0.11-point leftward shift for Republicans. In short, better-resourced legislatures appear to create stronger

⁷This result is not an artifact of a mechanical ceiling on ideological movement: normalizing the shift by the distance to the most extreme member of the new party, the coefficient remains significant for Democrats, confirming that party-median Democrats traverse a larger fraction of the available ideological space.

pressures for switchers to conform to their new party.

Hypothesis 6 finds no support in the shift-size model: positioning relative to districts does not appear to matter, suggesting that party pressure operates independently of constituency preferences. Finally, Hypothesis 9 finds no support. Indeed, former majority-party members of both parties make marginally 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.

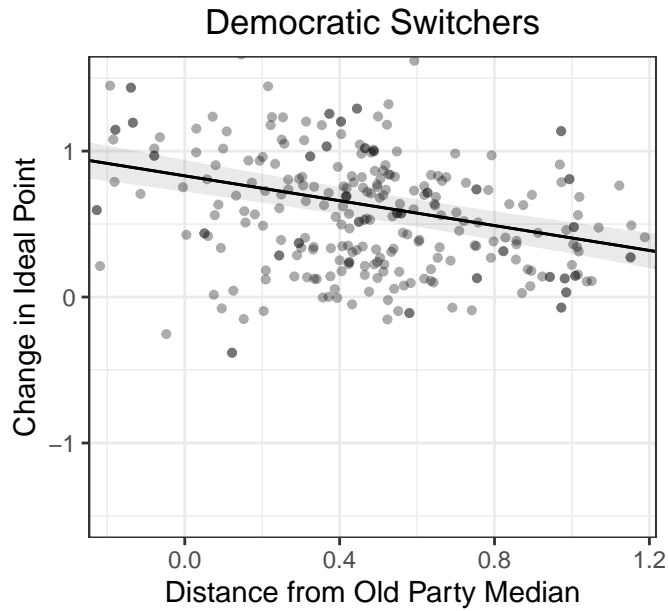


Figure 6: *The predicted effect of signed distance from party medians on the size of the shift in ideal points for Democratic party switchers (raw data is added as dots). The effect is strongest for party-median Democrats.*

Table 4: *Switcher Ideal Point Shift Models*

	Democrats	Republicans
	(1)	(2)
Party Ideology Difference	-0.43*** (0.06)	0.18 (0.11)
Conditional Party Government (latent)	1.04*** (0.23)	-1.29*** (0.44)
Log Expenditures per Seat	0.12*** (0.04)	-0.11** (0.06)
District Opinion Difference	-0.01 (0.07)	-0.07 (0.19)
Majority Member	-0.11* (0.07)	0.27* (0.15)
Majority Party Margin	0.52 (0.39)	0.20 (0.62)
Majority Member X Party Margin	-0.36 (0.52)	-0.60 (1.10)
Constant	-0.69** (0.30)	0.94** (0.42)
Observations	290	97
Log Likelihood	-67.61	-54.38
Akaike Inf. Crit.	157.21	130.75
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	197.58	159.07

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

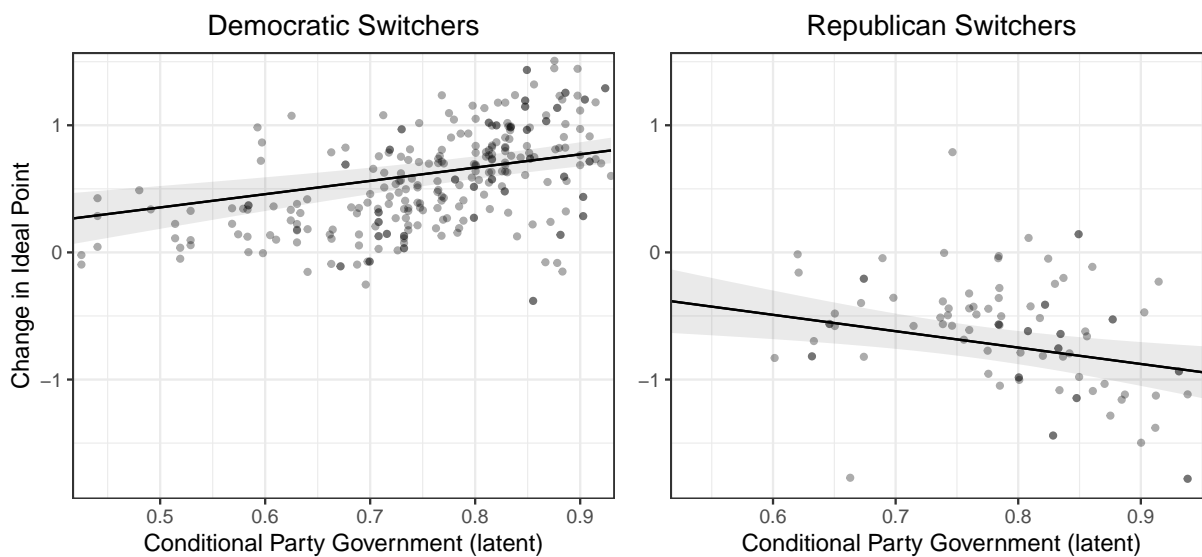


Figure 7: *The predicted effect of conditional party government on the size of the shift in ideal points for party switchers (raw data is added as dots). The effect is similar for both parties: strongest when parties are internally homogenous and externally distinct.*

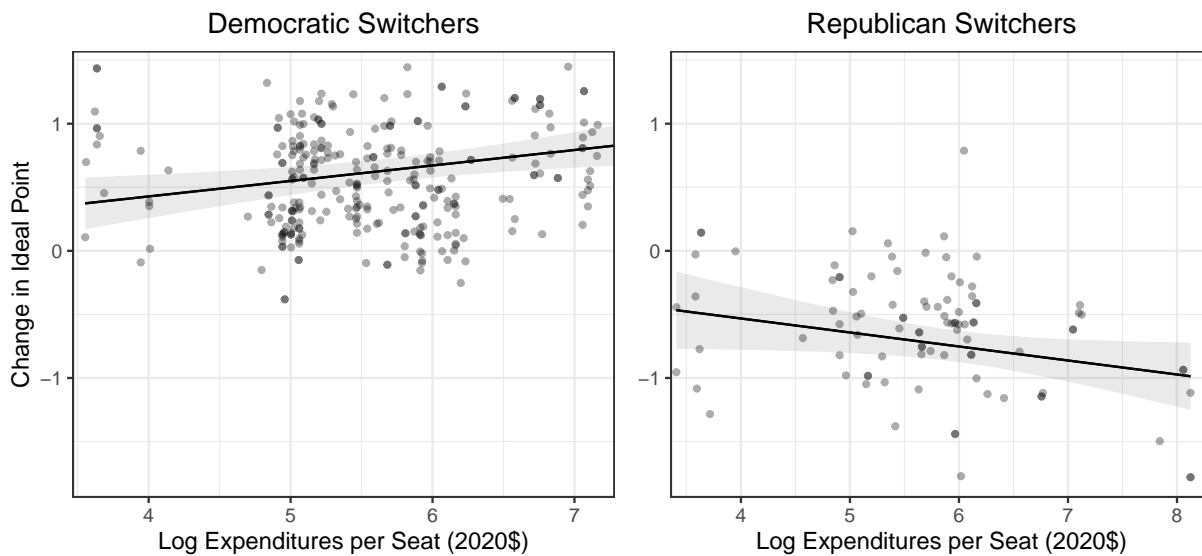


Figure 8: *The predicted effect of legislative professionalism on the size of the shift in ideal points for party switchers (raw data is added as dots). In more professionalized legislatures, switchers of both parties move further toward their new party.*

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—528 state-level switches in 49 states—is substantially larger than those available to prior studies and spans greater institutional variation. It confirms that parties reshape legislative behavior. Among major-party switchers, the average movement is about 0.60 common-space units, roughly two-fifths of the typical gap between party medians.

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 contributes little independent explanatory power to the magnitude of switching and does not support the district-misfit hypothesis in the incidence model, suggesting that party switching is driven more by ideological alignment with the party caucus than by electoral pressures from constituents. Once members cross the aisle, the magnitude and pattern of their ideological shifts vary by party. Most strikingly, party-median Democrats rather than conservatives make the largest ideological leaps when switching. This pattern is consistent with parties concentrating 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. Stronger CPG both reduces the incidence of switching and amplifies the ideological jumps made by those who do switch, with similar magnitudes for both parties. The competitive environment matters too, but differently for each outcome. 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. Majority status and margins do not, however, predict how far switchers move once they cross the aisle—party pressure on post-switch behavior appears to operate through different channels than the calculus of whether to switch at all. Legislative professionalism reinforces this pattern as well: in better-resourced legislatures, switchers adjust further toward their new party, consistent with the view that institutional capacity amplifies partisan pressure. These patterns are especially visible in state legislatures, which vary in party systems, competitive

context, and institutional capacity.

Party switching functions as a rare natural experiment, and the findings support conditional theories of party influence: parties constrain behavior, but the magnitude of that constraint varies systematically with context and individual circumstances. These findings also 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 party-median legislators 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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