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

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## Abstract

Do parties affect their member's revealed preferences, or do they merely reflect them? Attempts to isolate party effects are fraught with inference problems. Party switchers are interesting because they can be seen as a natural experiment on the effect of parties on legislator behavior. I construct a data set of state legislative party switchers from 1989-2020 and find over 400 party switches at the state level, considerably more than previous analyses at the congressional and state legislative levels. Party switchers on average jump over a little less than a fifth of all their fellow state legislators in ideological terms. I use the switching data in conjunction with ideal points data from Shor and McCarty (2011) in three applications. The first is predicting switching as a function of ideological positioning relative to switcher's old party and district. I find that legislators who are too moderate for their old parties and districts are far more likely to switch parties. The second explains the variation in the size of the shift in voting behavior before and after the shift. I use this to characterize the heterogenous effect of parties on their members' behavior. Finally, I investigate the electoral consequences of party switching, and find that there is an electoral penalty, replicating previous findings.

"This is a core ideological decision... When I got up here, I had to set some core political values. And I just fit better with Republicans." — Utah Representative Eric Hutchings, 2002

"I hope (Eric) can sleep at night after what the Republicans in the Legislature just did to children, public education and the elderly.... We will run a good candidate against Eric." — Utah Democratic State Party Chairwoman Meg Holbrook

"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

"The residents of District 32 deserve a Republican legislator who will reflect their values, and Laura Ebke certainly does not... She abandoned our party and its principals." – Nebraska Republican Party Executive Director Kenny Zoeller

# 1 Introduction

One of the enduring questions in the study of American politics has to do with the extent of party influence on legislators. One perspective sees a minimal role for parties: either largely epiphenomenal, or as mere groupings of like-minded politicians (Mayhew 1974; Krehbiel 1993; Poole and Rosenthal 1997). Another perspective sees parties as having a decisive influence on legislator behavior (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001). Nevertheless, the extreme correlation of party and preferences, as well the role of agenda-setting in determining which roll call votes are cast, makes it difficult to disentangle the true role of parties. A variety of methodological innovations have been proposed to address the question. Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart (2001) use an external survey to judge "true" ideology. Snyder and Groseclose (2000) scale close and lopsided roll calls to infer the strength of party influence. McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2001) estimate party pressure by allowing each party to have distinct cutting lines on roll call votes. Binder, Lawrence, and Maltzman (1999) develop an interest group index. Cox and Poole (2002) generate an expected Rice cohesion score.

Another tack has been to try to use natural experiments to uncover party effects, with the idea being that an exogenous change in party influence occurs, while the array of preferences–the most likely confounding variable–remains constant. One such experiment are retiring Congressmen Jenkins, Crespin, and Carson (2005); Rothenberg and Sanders (2000). The other natural experiment is the phenomenon of party switchers. Party switching is a deliberate legislative strategy that has elec-

toral roots, especially at times of political realignment (Aldrich and Bianco 1992).

For party switchers, party pressures are dramatically altered, which should reveal the toothlessness of parties if expressed ideology also does not change, or their true power if it changes dramatically. Unfortunately, the relative paucity of cases in Congress (only around three dozen switched in the postwar years) does not allow for very powerful inferences. Nokken and Poole (2004) find 24 incumbent party switchers in Congress over a five decade period from 1949. Only 20 of these are major party switchers (five from Republicans to Democrats, and 15 in the reverse case). More recent time periods are even more stark. Party switching in Congress has been dominated by switches from Democrats to Republicans; there have been barely any in the other direction. Since 1999, only 9 more have switched parties.

The predictors of party switching are typically cited as electoral threat (Castle and Fett 2000; Nokken 2009) or progressive ambition (Yoshinaka 2015). Ideological dissonance as a predictor is cited (King and Benjamin 1986) far more often than tested. Studies analyzing legislative voting behavior (Oppenheimer 2000; Nokken 2000; Nokken and Poole 2004; Nokken 2009; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2001; Hager and Talbert 2000) almost always find significant changes. The consequences of party switching, beyond voting behavior, have been studied in the electoral arena (Grose and Yoshinaka 2003) where members of Congress who switch parties are typically penalized. At the same time, they potentially gain advantages inside their chamber (possibly as inducements to switch) like plum committee assignments (Yoshinaka 2005).

There have been few previous studies of state legislative party switching, partly because getting comprehensive data on the phenomenon is so difficult. A few qualitative accounts exist (Canon 1992; Glaser 1998; Rothenberg 1985), typically focusing on the Southern realignment and the rise of the Republican party in the region. More systematically, Glaser (2001) investigates party switching in Southern state legislatures between 1980-2000 and finds small ideological effects of party switching using interest group ratings. Using such data, while understandable, is problematic on a number of grounds, primarily in making valid cross-state and over-time comparisons (Snyder 1992; Shor and McCarty 2011).

The most complete look at the determinants of party switching at the state legislative level are Yoshinaka (2015) and McKee and Yoshinaka (2015). They look at Democratic state legislators in 11 southern states, finding evidence that progressive ambition, district demographics, and political contextual variables (like redistricting), lead to a higher probability of switching.

In terms of the consequences of party switching, Grose (2004) replicates the Congressional finding of an electoral penalty to party switching.

In these papers, most of the emphasis is on district- or state-level variables, with less attention to individual level characteristics that might lead to higher switching incidence. Not only is there is sample size issue, focusing only on single party, single region switchers might also miss important heterogeneity in the effect.

Even more importantly, there has been a complete lack of attention to ideology. In other contexts, ideologues who no longer fit their districts have been shown to be more likely to lose their elections (Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002). It should also follow that ambitious politicians might try to mitigate the degree to which they do not fit their own parties or districts by switching parties. This should probably happen pretty rarely both because switching itself might convey negative information to voters, but also because legislators in the contemporary period are fairly well sorted into parties and districts.

In this paper I leverage a new data set of state legislative party switchers drawn from 48 states over 1979-2020. I first describe the data. Then I seeks to identify the correlates of variation in the incidence of switching, the size of the party effect on legislative behavior revealed by party switching, and an investigation into the electoral consequences of party switching.

## 2  Data

### 2.1  Party Switchers

In contrast to the handful of Congressional party switchers, I count 427 state legislative switchers from 48 different states (shown in Figure 1), in every region of the country, and in every combination of major and minor party transition. The major party switching story from the qualitative literature was one of party sorting, where conservative Southern Democrats switched to being conservative Republicans. The full story is more nuanced. Table **??** confirms that the South has the largest share of party switchers, at 58%. Rounding out the regional picture, Northeast has its fair share at around 20% and the Midwest and the West have relatively few switchers, at about 11-12%.

In terms of partisanship, the modal switch is–as expected–Democrat to Republican (see Table **??**). Yet there are a rather substantial proportion of party switchers who went the other way. About 7% of switchers were Independents moving to a major party, while 21% of switchers left a major party to become Independents. Even in the South, 24% of Southern party switchers actually switched to the Democratic party, or to Indepedent status. Note too, that switching to the Democratic party is more common than to the Republican party in the Northeast, and about as common in the Midwest

and West. Party switching in the United States is quite heterogeneous in terms of where legislators switch from and to.

The size of the ideological changes can be seen summarized in Table **??**. Major party switchers moved on average about 0.6 points. This is fairly significant, given that the size of one standard deviation in ideology over all the states and time periods is about 0.9, and the averaged difference between party medians is about 1.4. 97% of Republicans switching to Democrats became more liberal, while 94% of Democrats switching to Republicans became more conservative. This is comparable to the 95% of Congressional switchers moving in the expected direction reported by McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2001).

Another way to benchmark the amount of change is to rank order all legislators, normalize the rank[1], and compute the difference pre-and-post switch. The average difference in the normalized rank for major party switchers is 0.18. McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2001) report the average party switcher moved 0.28 in normalized rank terms in Congress. Party specific changes can be seen in Table **??**. Democrats switching to the Republican party jump less than Republicans switching in the opposite directions.

Figure 2 shows that party switching over the past three decades not been uniform in trend. Republican switching into the Democratic party peaked in 2007-2008, one year after large victories by state legislative Democrats in the midterm presided over by an unpopular president and an unpopular war. Democratic switches to the Republican party peaked in 2009-2010 in the runup to the big Republican victory. Since that peak year, the number of Democratic switchers has fallen dramatically, even through the 2014 midterm losses.

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[1]This is done by dividing the rank by the number of legislators.
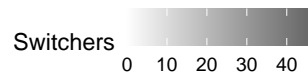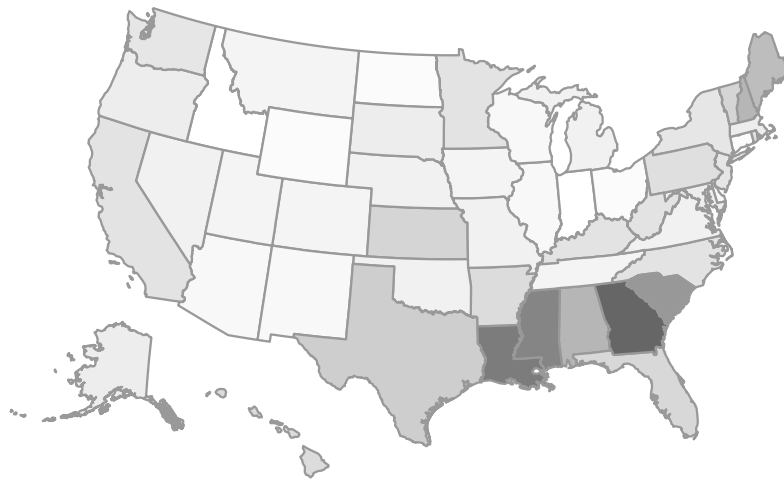
**(a)** Switchers
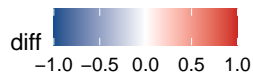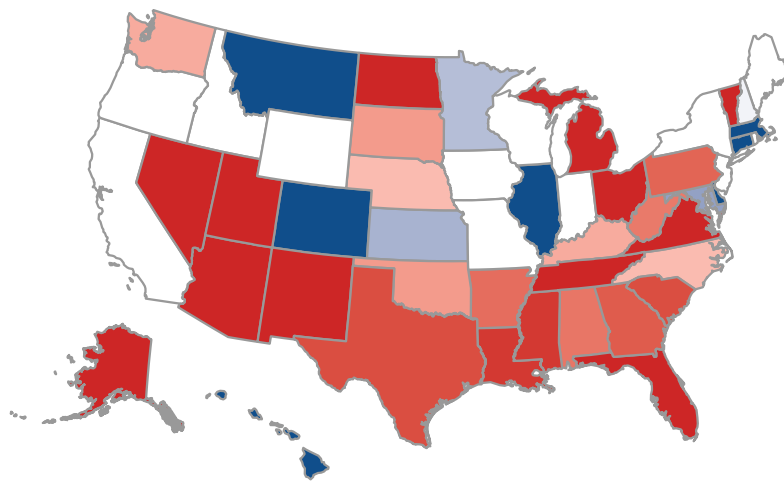


**(b)** Partisan Difference in Proportions

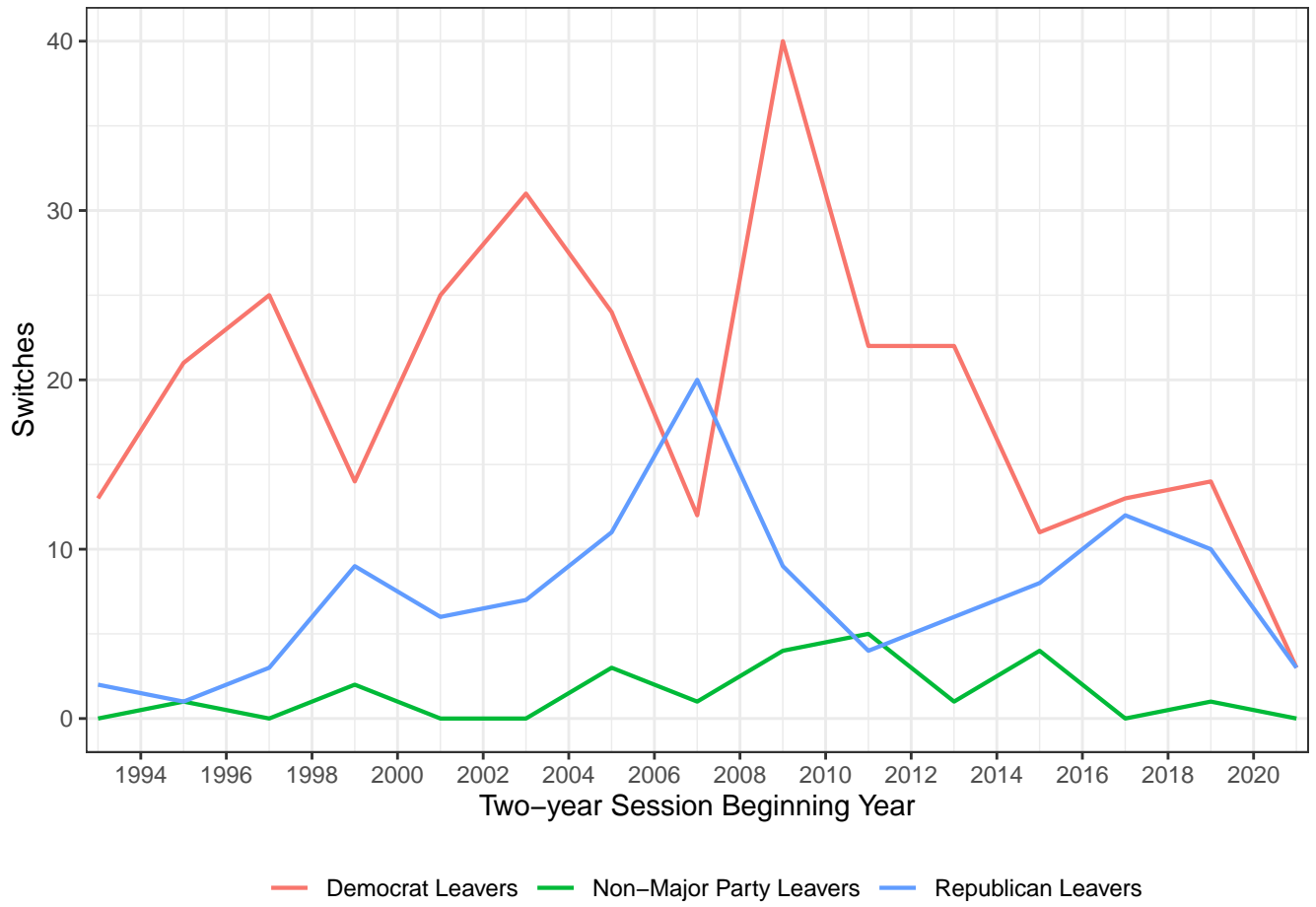**Figure 1:** *Map of switchers, by state.*

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**Figure 2:** *Trends in party switching (summarized by leave party).*

## 2.2   Common Space Ideal Points

Our first need is individual level data on the ideology of state legislators, before and after their party switch. The key challenge is to acquire data for the US states over time in the first place, and then to insure cross-sectional and longitudinal comparability. Being a conservative in the Alabama House is quite different from being a conservative in the Massachusetts Senate. We obtain individual-level data from Shor and McCarty (2011), updated with data on legislators elected up through 2016, and in elections as early as 1986 for several states. In all, the dataset currently covers 24,380 unique state legislators, with more than 2,200 chamber-years of data.

A basic characteristic of the data is that legislators get one score for their entire career,[2] with one crucial exception. Party switchers alone are assigned two scores, reflecting their roll call votes before and after their switch. The difference between the two scores will be our measure of the ideological consequence of switching parties. This distance is measured on the common space scale, and is signed. Positive numbers indicate a move in the conservative direction; negative numbers the opposite.

## 2.3   Measures of the predictors

The level of analysis is the legislator-year to capture the dynamic effects of individual characteristics. A legislator in a particular year who does not switch in that year is assigned a zero for the outcome variable, while a legislator who does switch in that year is assigned a one.

My measure of party fit is the signed distance between the legislator ideology and the chamber party median (the old party for switchers). Conservative Democrats would get a positive measure on this, while liberal Republicans would get a negative measure.

To test theories about district matching, we need a measure of ideological preferences at the state legislative district level. I use Tausanovitch and Warshaw (2013) as the source of district opinion data. This score is based on aggregating large scale opinion surveys to attain sample sizes large enough to get estimates by state legislative districts. The problem is that these scores are not on the same scale as the state legislator ideology data. To get around this problem, I regress legislator scores on legislator party and district opinion scores in a first stage equation.[3] I then take the resid-

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[2]An assumption derived from evidence that legislators "die in their ideological boots" (Poole and Rosenthal 1997; **?**; Poole 2005)

[3]I interact party with opinion measures to account for party-based heterogeneity in the relationship between opinion and legislative ideology. I also add state and year fixed effects to account for ideological heterogeneity by state.

uals from the model as my measure of how well the legislator fits his or her district. If the measure is 0, then the legislator fits the district exactly as we would have predicted, conditional on the legislator's partisanship, the state in which they serve, and the district's ideological position. Movement in either direction from zero implies misfit between legislator and district: positive measures imply the legislator is more conservative than expected, negative ones the legislator is more liberal than expected.

# 3    Model of Party Switching

I estimated a multilevel model of the incidence of party switching. Data is measured at the legislator-year level. Since switching is so incredibly rare (accounting for 0.2% of the legislator-year observations), a more appropriate choice is combining all switchers with a sample of nonswitchers (King and Zeng 2001). The sample of non-switchers is held at 10 times the number of switchers, separated by party (since all models are party-specific). Other sample sizes return substantively similar results. I used a two stage sampling design, first sampling the legislator, and then sampling a single year of service for that particular legislator **?**.

I include varying intercepts for state-years, to account for the unmeasured effect of context. This should account for the effect, for example, of redistricting, party transitions, changes in electoral competitiveness, and demographic characteristics and the like.

Separate models were run for Republicans and Democrats to assess effect heterogeneity by party. Switchers are included in the model according to their old parties. The first three columns of each table summarize the results from bivariate regressions.

The results are surprisingly similar for both parties. Republicans who are to the *left* of their chamber party caucus are substantially more likely to switch parties, and the same is true for Democrats to the *right* of their caucus. When included in the full model specification (column 4), party differences fall in strength for both parties but retain significance.

Democrats who are more to the *right* of their district than we would expect given their districts and states are much more likely to switch parties, and the same is true for Republicans who are too far to the *left* of their districts than we would expect. This effect falls substantially for both parties when included in the full specification, but is still significant at conventional levels.

Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the marginal effects of both variables for both parties from specification 4 while holding the remaining predictors at their median or modal value. They dramatically show how party and district misfits are much more likely to switch than those who fit their district.

In no specification are legislators who evidence progressive ambition (by deciding to run for higher office) more likely to switch parties. This is probably because there are serious electoral costs to switching (Grose and Yoshinaka 2003).

**Table 1:** *Switchers from the Republican Party*

|  | Party | District | All |
|---|---|---|---|
|  | (1) | (2) | (3) |
| Party Difference | $-3.72^{***}$ |  | $-3.43^{***}$ |
|  | (0.48) |  | (0.52) |
| District Opinion |  | $-3.07^{***}$ | $-2.14^{***}$ |
|  |  | (0.66) | (0.65) |
| Polarization | $-0.98^{***}$ | 0.35 | $-0.20$ |
|  | (0.29) | (0.44) | (0.42) |
| Member of Majority | $-1.49^{***}$ | $-1.02^{***}$ | $-1.11^{***}$ |
|  | (0.28) | (0.32) | (0.33) |
| Constant | $-0.87^{*}$ | $-0.73$ | $-0.81$ |
|  | (0.47) | (0.60) | (0.55) |
| PCP | 0.93 | 0.94 | 0.94 |
| PRE | 0.1 | 0.17 | 0.19 |
| Observations | 1,020 | 1,020 | 1,020 |
| Log Likelihood | $-215.44$ | $-232.36$ | $-206.98$ |
| Akaike Inf. Crit. | 442.89 | 476.72 | 427.97 |
| Bayesian Inf. Crit. | 472.45 | 506.29 | 462.46 |

*Note:* $^{*}$p$<$0.1; $^{**}$p$<$0.05; $^{***}$p$<$0.01

**Table 2:** *Switchers from the Democratic Party*

| | Party | District | All |
|---|---|---|---|
| | (1) | (2) | (3) |
| Party Difference | 4.49*** | | 3.57*** |
| | (0.35) | | (0.36) |
| District Opinion | | 4.63*** | 3.15*** |
| | | (0.44) | (0.41) |
| Polarization | −0.89** | 2.15*** | 1.09** |
| | (0.40) | (0.45) | (0.47) |
| Member of Majority | −0.39 | −0.43* | −0.31 |
| | (0.26) | (0.24) | (0.26) |
| Constant | −2.81*** | −3.35*** | −3.53*** |
| | (0.71) | (0.68) | (0.70) |
| PCP | 0.95 | 0.95 | 0.95 |
| PRE | 0.43 | 0.37 | 0.44 |
| Observations | 2,379 | 2,379 | 2,379 |
| Log Likelihood | −421.57 | −444.56 | −379.76 |
| Akaike Inf. Crit. | 855.15 | 901.13 | 773.52 |
| Bayesian Inf. Crit. | 889.79 | 935.77 | 813.94 |

*Note:* $^{*}p<0.1;\ ^{**}p<0.05;\ ^{***}p<0.01$
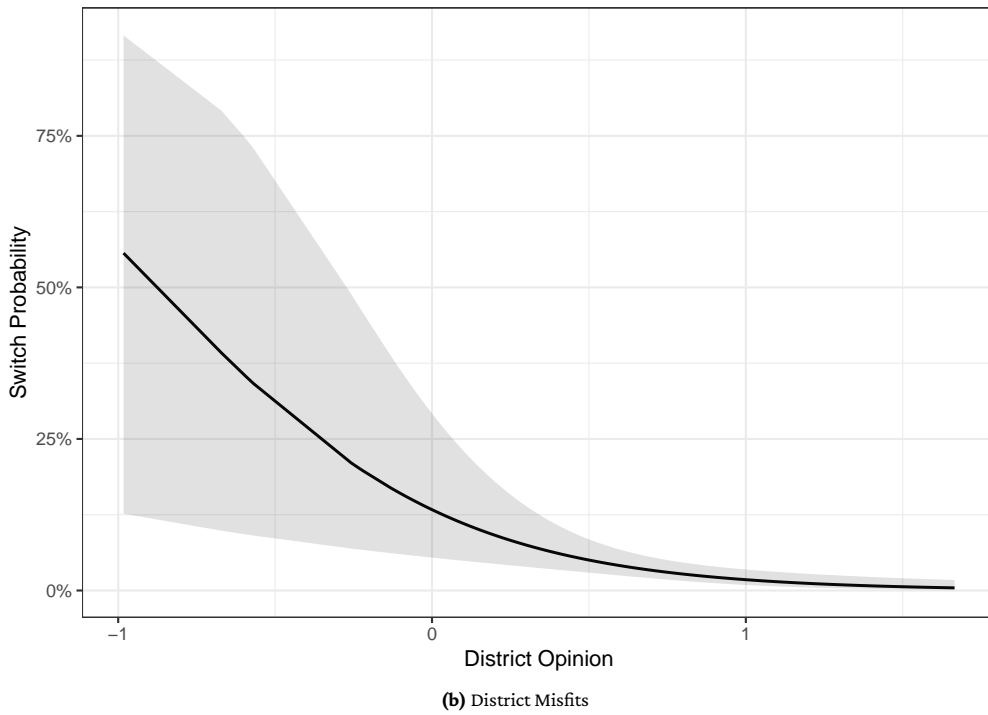
**(a)** Party Misfits
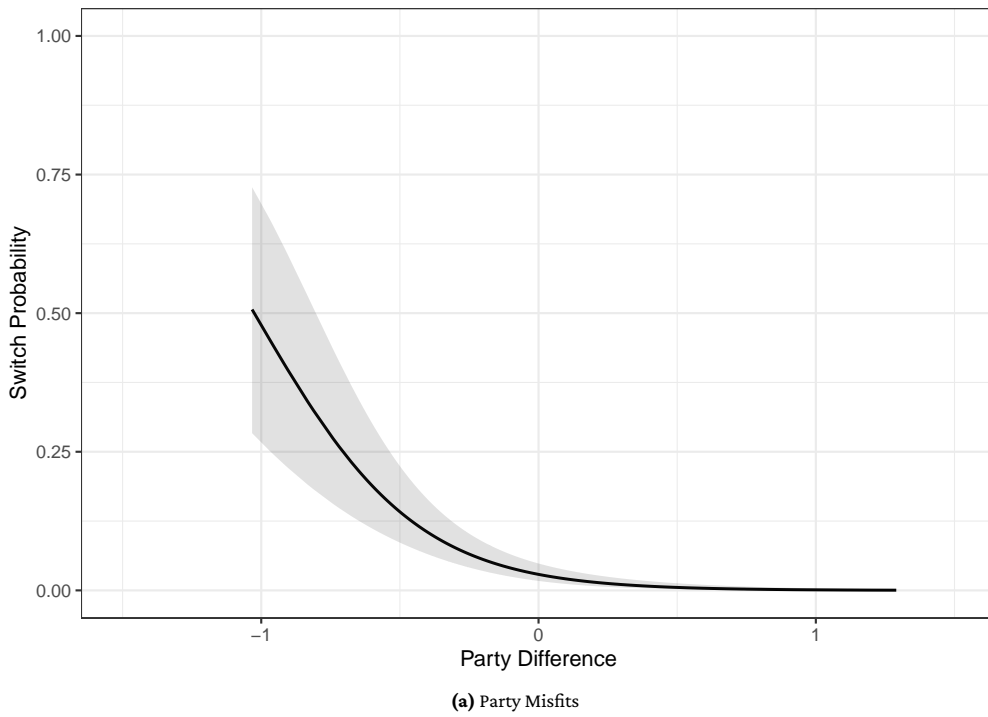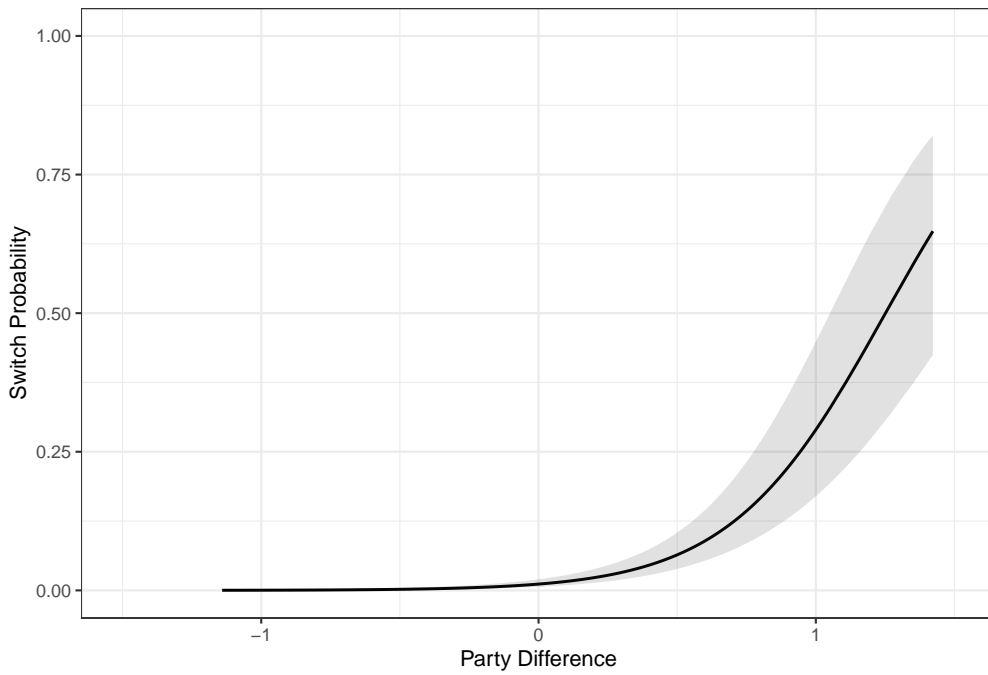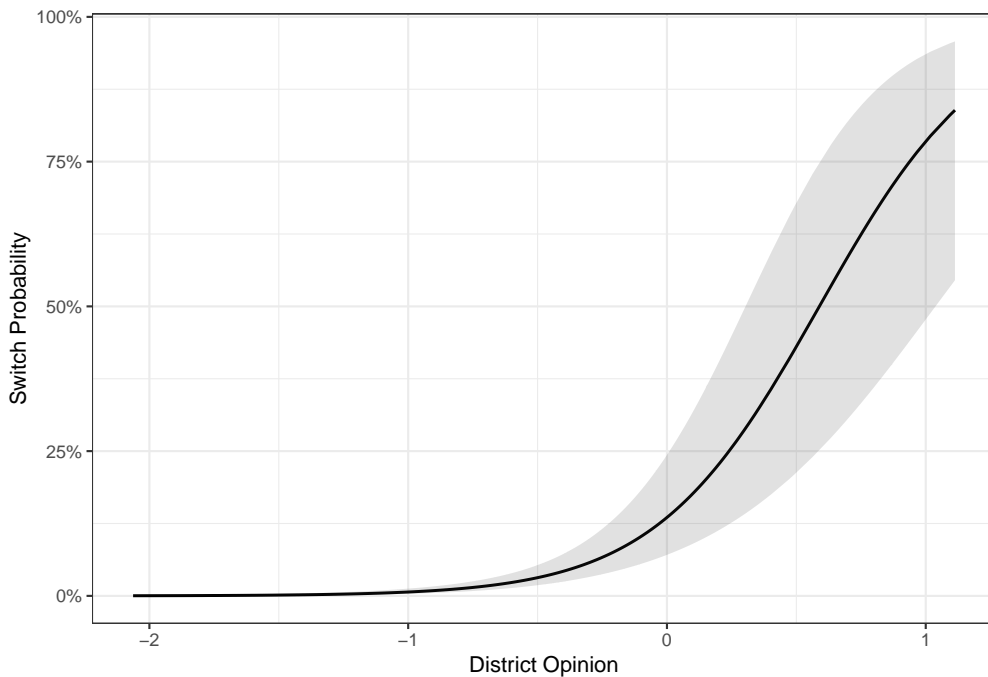


**(b)** District Misfits

**Figure 3:** *Switchers from the Republican party: predicted probabilities of switching as a function of (a) signed distance from party medians and (b) unexpected moderation relative to district opinion. Republican switchers cluster at the liberal end of their parties, and are unexpectedly liberal for their districts.*

**(a)** Party Misfits



**(b)** District Misfits

**Figure 4:** *Switchers from the Democratic party: predicted probabilities of switching as a function of (a) signed distance from party medians and (b) unexpected moderation relative to district opinion. Democratic switchers cluster at the conservative end of their parties, and are unexpectedly conservative for their districts.*

# 4    Monte Carlo Tests

I conduct permutation tests to check the robustness of my findings. This is done via Monte Carlo simulations with a specific procedure is as follows. For each switcher in my data, I select a simulated switcher via a repeated random uniform draw from the party caucus and subtract the distance between the hypothetical switcher and the caucus median. I repeat this process 10,000 times for each of the state-chamber-years that had switchers in my data.

Figure 5 shows just how ill-fitting are party switchers from their old parties. Democratic switchers (blue line) are much more conservative than their caucuses, and Republicans switchers are much more liberal (red line).
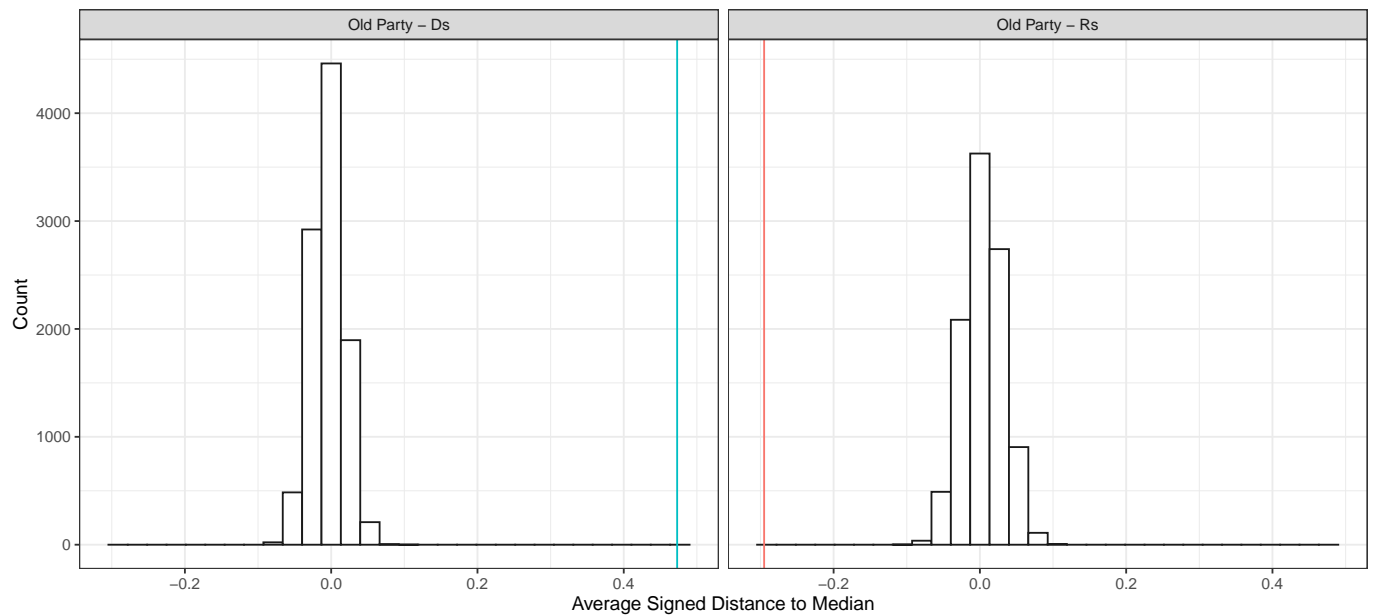


**Figure 5:** *Monte Carlo simulations for both parties prior to the switch.*

After the switch, Figure 6 shows that party switchers are still misfits in their new parties, but to a smaller extent. New Democrats are still on the right wing of their new party, and new Republicans are still on the left wing of their new party. Party switchers are closer to the center of their new parties than they were in the old parties, but they are still moderates in their new parties. If the goal was to stand out less in their new parties, the switchers succeeded – but presumably undershot if conformity was their sole objective.
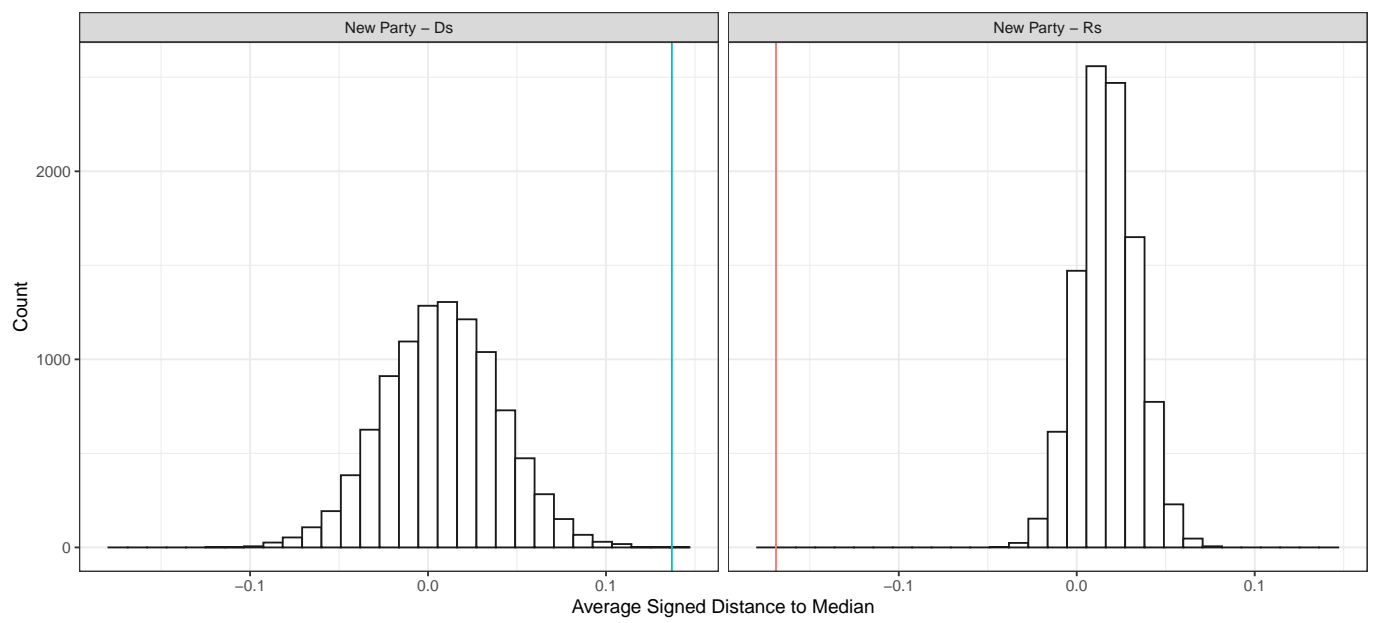
**Figure 6:** *Monte Carlo simulations for both parties after the switch.*

# 5   Model of Switch Size

We can calculate the average size of the ideal point shift for party switchers in the raw data, as in Table **??**. There's quite a bit of variance, however, and understanding the predictors of these changes requires multivariate modeling. As above, we separate models by (old) party to allow for effect heterogeneity. The sample is now the entire population of switchers for whom we have data on the predictors. This drops the number of observations for models that have variables that rely on district opinion. The models are multilevel with varying intercepts for states and years to account for unmodelled influences on the size of the shift.

The coefficient estimates in Table xx show that relative party position is an important determinant of the size of the ideological change, for both parties. Positioning relative to districts doesn't seem to be important at all.

**Table 3:** *Switcher Ideal Point Shift Models*

|  | R | D | R | D | R | D |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) |
| Party Difference | 0.28* | −0.43*** |  |  | 0.23 | −0.44*** |
|  | (0.16) | (0.07) |  |  | (0.16) | (0.08) |
| Polarization | −0.32*** | 0.22*** | −0.45*** | 0.10 | −0.38*** | 0.22** |
|  | (0.12) | (0.08) | (0.12) | (0.09) | (0.13) | (0.09) |
| District Opinion |  |  | 0.17 | −0.04 | 0.13 | 0.01 |
|  |  |  | (0.11) | (0.05) | (0.12) | (0.04) |
| Constant | −0.12 | 0.51*** | −0.08 | 0.47*** | −0.09 | 0.50*** |
|  | (0.18) | (0.13) | (0.17) | (0.15) | (0.18) | (0.14) |
| Observations | 60 | 188 | 60 | 188 | 60 | 188 |
| Log Likelihood | −34.77 | −44.84 | −35.39 | −60.66 | −35.42 | −47.03 |
| Akaike Inf. Crit. | 81.53 | 101.67 | 82.78 | 133.32 | 84.85 | 108.07 |
| Bayesian Inf. Crit. | 94.10 | 121.09 | 95.34 | 152.74 | 99.51 | 130.72 |

*Note:* $^{*}$p$<$0.1; $^{**}$p$<$0.05; $^{***}$p$<$0.01

Based on the first set of models (with the most data), Figure 7 shows the variation in the party difference effect (x-axis) on the predicted size of the shift (y-axis). It illustrates where parties have

the most effect on their members' voting behavior. Centrist Republicans and Democrats (those closest to 0 on the distance measure) have the largest predicted shift in their ideal point. The most liberal Republicans (those far to the left of 0) and the most conservative Democrats (those far to the right of 0), are predicted to have the least shift in their ideal points after a shift. In other words, parties appear to be modifying the voting behavior of their moderate members most. Those really far out of their party's mainstream are least pressured by their parties.
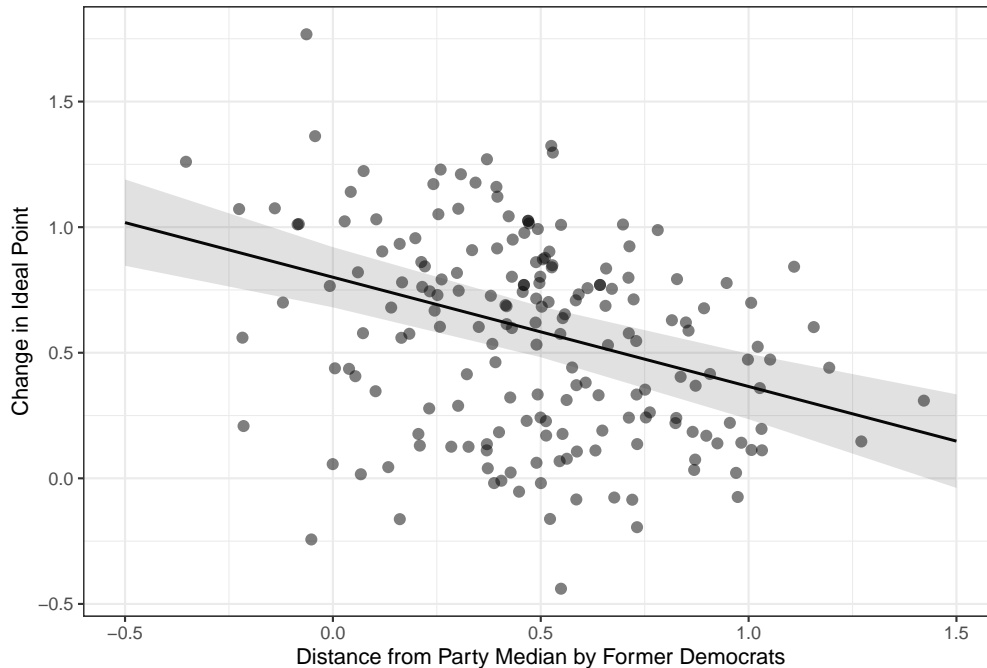


**Figure 7:** *The predicted effect of signed distanced from party medians on the size of the shift in ideal points for party switchers (raw data is added as dots). The effect is strongest for formerly Democratic centrists.*

The natural experiment afforded by party switching allows us to use the estimated coefficients from the model to predict the counterfactual size of ideological shift that would be induced were non-switchers to be members of the other party, and all else were to remain equal. In other words, how much more conservative would a Democrat be were that legislator to be actually a Republican, or equivalently, how much more liberal would a Republican be were that legislator a Democrat? That distance is an individual-level measure of the party effect on voting behavior for a non-switching legislator.

We aggregate these individual-level predictions together and plot them as density curves in Figure 8. The absolute value of the mean of the Democratic effect is slightly higher than that for Republicans. But the big difference is the spread of party effects by party. Republicans are more heteroge-

neous with respect to the pressure that their party places on them when it comes to legislative voting, as compared with Democrats. Notice, however, that since there is selection bias in who switches parties (moderates) and in the effect of the party on the legislator (the most for moderates), this distance can be interpreted as the *upper bound* of party effects.

We can continue the counterfactual exercise by comparing the aggregated difference between Democrats and Republicans if one or the other party entirely switched sides. Doing this calculation and averaging the two yields a median difference between parties that is 35% of the size of the regular distance between the medians of the two parties. This implies that, under even very generous estimates of the effect of parties, they are still represent a fraction of the distance between the two main political groupings in American society.
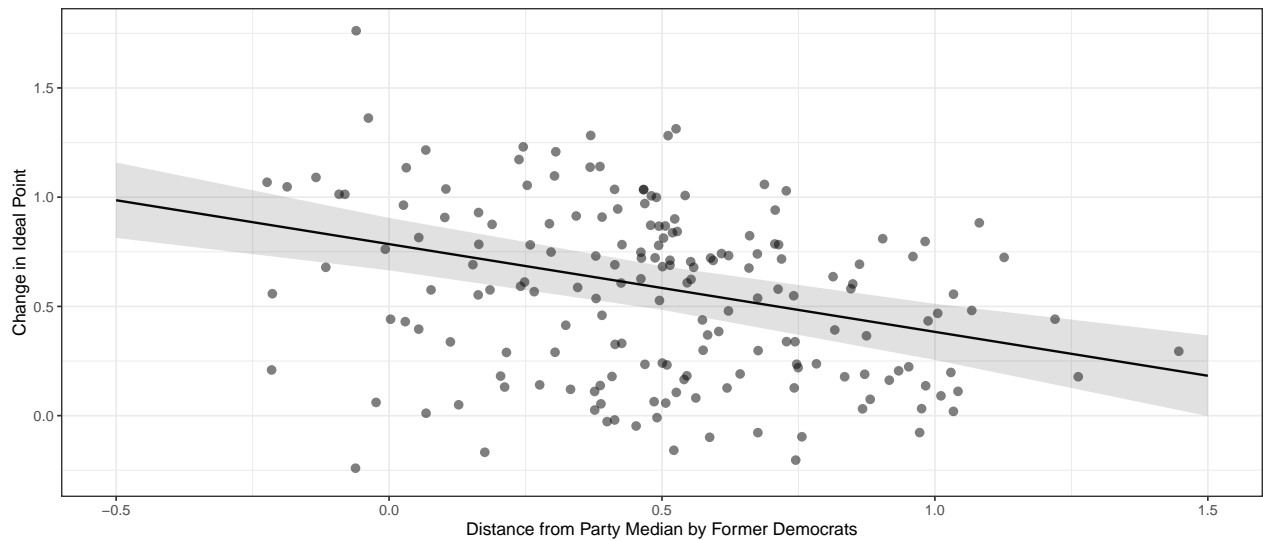


**Figure 8:** *Calculated party effects on nonswitchers at the legislator-year level, separated by party.*

# 6   Model of Election Consequences

I investigate whether party switching has electoral consequences. My measure of electoral consequences is quite broad: whether the legislator loses or wins their next general election.

I merge the switcher and nonswitchers sample with Carl Klarner's SLER dataset, updated through the 2016 elections (the last publicly available). This creates a cross-sectional sample, with the predictor of interest whether the legislator switches or not, and an outcome whether they win or lose the next scheduled election.[4]

As above, I use a multilevel model with varying intercepts for states and years to account for unmodelled contextual factors that affect probabilities of winning. The results are in the Table xx below, and illustrated with a predicted effects plot in Figure 9. In both parties, there is an electoral penalty for switching. Republicans who don't switch win their next elections at a 95% rate, compared with Republican switchers who win "only" at a 76% rate, or a roughly 20% drop. This similar to Democrats, who experience a drop in expected win rates from 85% to 68%.

**Table 4**

|  | R | D |
|---|---|---|
|  | (1) | (2) |
| Party Switcher | $-0.83^{**}$ | $-1.05^{**}$ |
|  | (0.38) | (0.45) |
|  |  |  |
| Constant | $2.13^{***}$ | $1.90^{***}$ |
|  | (0.24) | (0.16) |
| Observations | 555 | 1,159 |
| Log Likelihood | $-221.81$ | $-465.70$ |
| Akaike Inf. Crit. | 451.61 | 939.40 |
| Bayesian Inf. Crit. | 468.89 | 959.63 |
| *Note:* | \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01 | |

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[4]Note that this ignores strategic retirements since not running is considered as missing data. Of course there's lots of reasons why candidates might not choose to run, which complicates the model and increases the data requirements needlessly for this application.
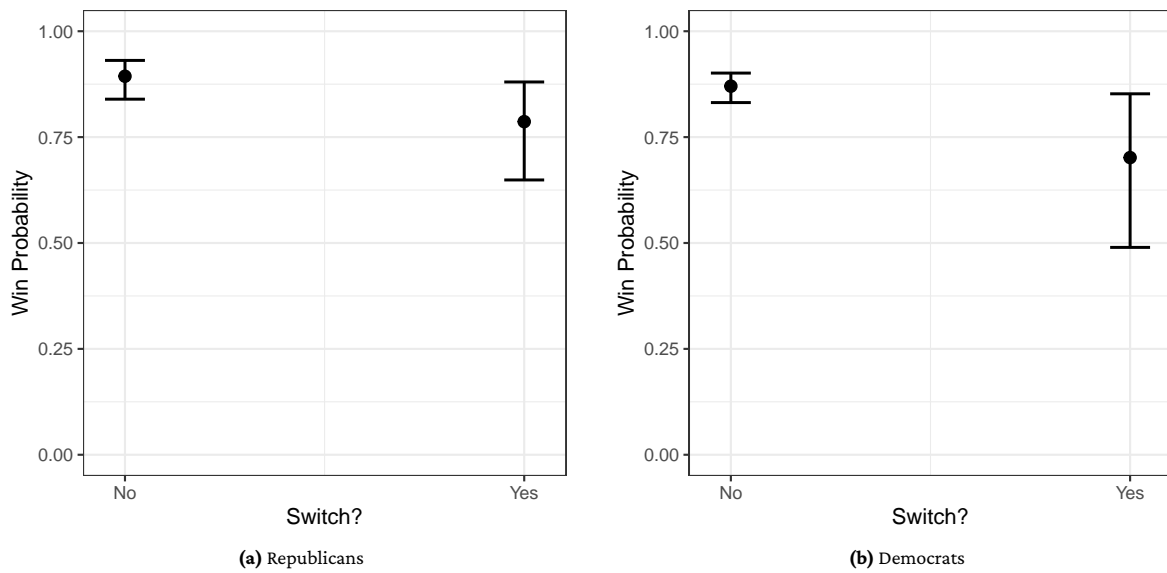
**(a)** Republicans
        **(b)** Democrats

**Figure 9:** *The predicted effect of switching on the probability of winning the next election, conditional on running. Both Republican and Democratic switchers incur an electoral penalty, but the latter is slightly larger.*

# 7 Discussion

Party switching is a rare event amongst American legislators. The evidence in this paper shows that two of the major reasons why it is so rare is because legislators find themselves in parties that are well sorted ideologically, and in districts that are not too dissimilar from them. When those few legislators in those occasional times find themselves located in parties or districts that do not fit them, they are far more likely to switch parties.

As rare as it is, it is a supremely useful natural experiment to help us disentangle the role of parties apart from a natural grouping of like-minded ideologues. Looking at state legislators, where there are twenty times the number of switchers in only the last two decades, is the right context to leverage this experiment.

There is a sizeable shift in voting behavior, summarized by the change in the pre- and post-switch ideal points for party switchers. This is particularly powerful evidence for the presence of party effects on the expressed preferences of legislators, since party switching provides a unique natural experiment. I also show evidence that party pressure is not constant, with party centrists feeling the greatest force to tack left or right. At the same time, legislators are not completely plastic and their personal ideological preferences are stronger than the party influence. Based on my model, the counterfactual world where one party's legislators switches entirely to the other side would still be polarized.

Finally, I find that state legislators who switch parties suffer an electoral penalty, and that this is true for both parties.

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