

Are State Legislative Leaders Centrists or Extremists? Yes, but it's complicated.

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Abstract

Median voter and party cartel theories of legislative organization predict or assume that elected party leaders will be centrists with respect to their constituency, the party caucus. Yet most recent empirical studies of leader positioning find that elected leaders are in fact extremists. Such studies are exclusively tested in Congress, and that limits the papers' analytical power and the external validity of the conclusions drawn. This paper features an original data set combining state legislative leadership data with an updated data set on state legislative ideology, with 2,476 unique leaders in 50 states from 1993-2022. Using Monte Carlo simulations to assess the possibility of nonrandom (centrist and extreme) leadership selection, state leaders are found to be overwhelmingly centrist. The story is more nuanced when it comes to which side of the party medians leaders come from. Democrats typically come from the left side of their party, while Republicans are split, being located on the right side only in the lower chamber and actually on the left side in the upper chamber. Models predicting the size of the divergence between leaders and their caucuses implicate intraparty heterogeneity and polarization as strong predictors.

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1 Introduction

In 2015, Democrat Carl Heastie became speaker of the New York State Assembly after longtime Speaker Sheldon Silver was forced to resign on federal corruption charges. Heastie was the 10th most liberal Democrat in the Assembly (with a Shor-McCarty common space NPAT score of 1.93) out of a caucus numbering 106, and more liberal than 99% of all state legislators in the country. In ascending to a rarely open position in a non-term-limited legislature, Heastie beat out Joseph Morelle (apparently the favored candidate of Governor Cuomo), who was just about at the middle of his caucus.

That same year, Republican Andy Biggs entered the last session of his service as president of the Arizona State Senate. Biggs was by far the most conservative Republican in the Senate (with a Shor-McCarty common space NPAT score of 1.93), even though Arizona Republicans are one of the most conservative in the entire country, and in fact was more conservative than 99% of all state legislators in the entire country. He left the State Senate in 2017 after winning a seat in the 5th U.S. House District where he is now a Freedom Caucus stalwart.

Both leaders were at the extreme ends of their party caucuses. In both cases, a series of more extreme bills were considered and some policies passed by the unified legislature in which they were located. New York passed a \$15 minimum wage and 12 weeks of paid family leave legislatively in 2016.¹ In 2017, New York enacted a Bernie Sanders-style free college tuition law.² Arizona, for its part, passed funding for its own border wall³, strengthened sentences for convicted undocumented immigrants⁴ and required physicians to inform abortion patients of the possibility of reversal of a chemically-induced abortion.⁵

There are plenty of counterexamples, of course. In 1999, Thomas Birmingham was the speaker and leader of relatively liberal Massachusetts lower chamber. That same year, Lynn Snodgrass was the speaker of the Oregon lower chamber and the leader of the moderate Republican caucus. In both cases, they were located exactly at their party caucus medians. Figure 1 plots these cases as histograms, locating the leaders as vertical lines on the histograms.

So are Heastie and Biggs typical or outliers? There are no answers in the empirical literature on state legislatures.

The theoretical literature on legislative organization has some major predictions regarding leader posi-

¹https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/how-a-15-minimum-wage-went-from-extreme-to-enacted/2016/04/05/6cf53d20-fa9f-11e5-80e4-c381214de1a3_story.html?utm_term=.c7a78f41c7c0

²<http://legislativegazette.com/archives/5062>

³<http://www.azleg.gov/legtext/52leg/1r/bills/sb1271p.pdf>

⁴<http://www.abc15.com/news/state/arizona-doug-ducey-signs-controversial-immigration-bill-hb-2244>

⁵<http://www.azcentral.com/story/news/arizona/politics/2015/03/23/arizona-house-approves-abortion-restrictions/70360204/>

tioning. Congressional scholarship places great importance on party and chamber leadership, who are crucial in the “team production” of collective outputs of brand name and policy, and use carrots and sticks to achieve those ends (Cox and McCubbins 1993). They may directly whip members, but they also control the agenda (Cox and McCubbins 2005) and manage negotiations between intraparty and crossparty stakeholders (King and Zeckhauser 2002). If leaders—armed with these potent tools—are systematically relatively extreme, we may fear that the representativeness of state legislatures is even worse than it looks by looking at the majority party alone.

What determines the ideological position of these party leaders? Standard median voter (Black 1948; Downs 1957) models suggest a convergence towards the center in elections. Party cartel models (Cox and McCubbins 1993) imply that they should reflect the ideology of centrist members of the party caucus. This is because leaders are the agents of the caucus, which is the principal. Elections of caucus centrists best reflects the caucus as a whole. On the other hand, Clausen and Wilcox (1987) claim leaders are chosen to represent the extreme faction of the party (between the median and the mean) which predominates in intraparty debates.

Yet a significant strand of the empirical literature on Congress has rejected the “middleperson hypothesis” perhaps due to pressures of party activists and donors. King and Zeckhauser (2002) find that leaders are almost always more extreme than the median party members, as measured by NOMINATE scores (Poole and Rosenthal 1997). Grofman, Koetzle and McGann (2002) have the same findings using interest group scores. Jesse and Malhotra (2010) re-examine this debate in the congressional context, and establish more valid methods for inferring the centrality of party leaders, finding qualified support for the “middleperson hypothesis.”

Beyond the empirical question of centrality, authors have examined predictors and consequences of extremists and moderates in leadership selection. For example, King and Zeckhauser (2002) find that more powerful positions like chamber leaders are more extreme than less powerful party leaders. McGann, Koetzle and Grofman (2002) locate the source of leadership extremism in the particular leadership election institutions. Heberlig, Hetherington and Larson (2006) connects campaign finance to leadership extremism and legislative polarization more broadly, with ideologues using money to reward other extremists.

In this paper I join a new data set of state legislative party leaders (1999-2019) with updated Shor-McCarty data. Using simulation tests for centrality, I will see whether people like Heastie and Biggs are typical.

Following Jesse and Malhotra (2010), I distinguish and test two separate hypotheses. The first hypothesis is that leaders are centrist. This is tested with a comparison between average absolute distances between leaders and their caucuses (for a variety of leader subsets), and that between the average difference of a large number of simulated leaders and party medians. I overwhelmingly reject the null hypothesis of random selection of leaders; actual leaders are very much centrists.

The second hypothesis is whether, irrespective of being centrists, leaders shade to the predictably extreme side of their party: the left side of the party median for Democrats, and the right side of the party median for Republicans. This is tested in a similar manner as the first hypothesis, with the exception of using signed distances as opposed to absolute distances. Here, the story is more nuanced than that for centrism. Democrats are overwhelmingly extreme in the expected leftward fashion. Republicans, however, are split. In the lower chamber, Republican leaders are typically extreme in the expected rightward way (though the evidence is less overwhelming for House Speakers). In the upper chamber, Republicans are unexpectedly extreme in the other direction: their chamber leaders are consistently on the left-wing side of their parties.

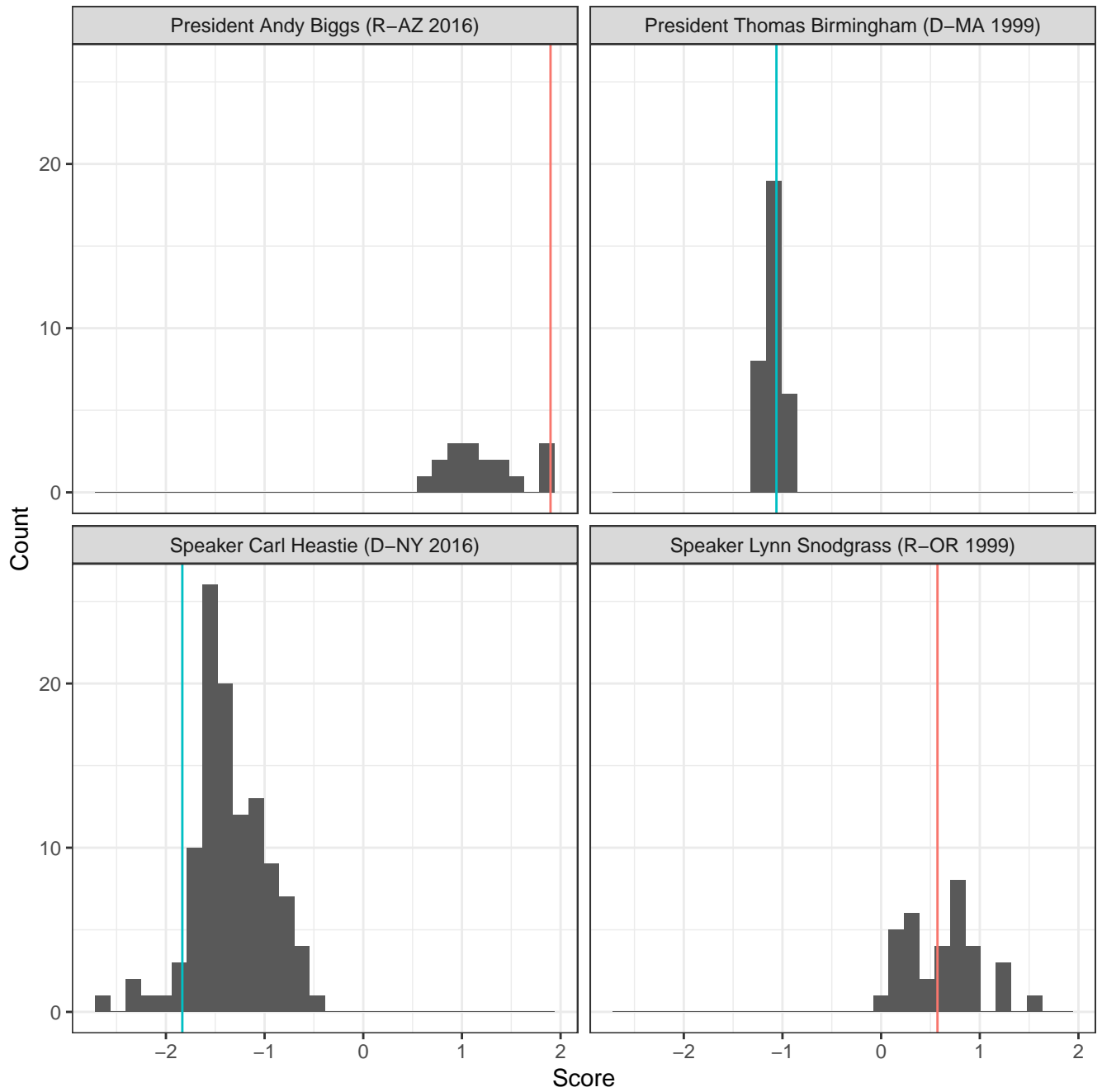


Figure 1: Four examples of extreme and centrist leaders.

2 Data

I collected data on party and chamber leaders in 50 states across 23 years, 1999-2021. The number and titles of leader names vary across the states and over time. I normalize these names to permit classification of each leader as either a “chamber” or a “party” leader. I define the former as being responsible for the operation of the chamber as a whole, and are elected (nominally) by the chamber. In reality, since leadership selection votes are almost always party-line votes, the prior-stage choice of the majority party is almost always the chamber choice as well. Nevertheless, chamber leaders may differ from “party leaders,” who I define as being responsible to the party caucus alone, and for which there is no chamber-wide election. I distinguish between these two as it may be the case that the difference in responsibilities calls for different types of leaders (Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991).

Overall, my data collection resulted in 8,079 leader-years and 2,476 unique major leaders. This compares with 236 leader-years from Jessee and Malhotra (2010) from the 56th-110th Congresses.

I then merge the leader data with updated Shor-McCarty ideology data, divided by party caucus for each state for each year in 1999-2019. Caucus medians are the standard of comparison to leadership. The extremist hypothesis would hold that leaders are consistently to right (left) of party medians for Republicans (Democrats).

2.1 Exploration

We begin by comparing overall averages for all state legislative leaders to the caucuses they represent. Overall, the aggregate differences are rather modest in comparison with a standard deviation of scores amongst all Democrats of 0.55 and 0.46 for Republicans. Nevertheless, and on the whole, Democratic leaders are more liberal than their caucus in both chambers. Republican leaders are more conservative than their caucus, but only in the House.

But these aggregate difference understate the heterogeneity of leader positions. Democratic leaders are to the left of their party medians about 57.6% and 58.9%, respectively, in state Houses and Senates. Republicans are to the right of their caucuses about 60.6% and 46.8% of the time, respectively.

Breaking down the leaders into chamber (typically Speakers and Senate Presidents) and party leaders (majority and minority leaders and whips) gives us some important new detail. The unexpectedly liberal Senate Republican leaders appear to be especially concentrated in chamber leaders. Party leaders appear, on the whole, to be more extreme than chamber leaders.

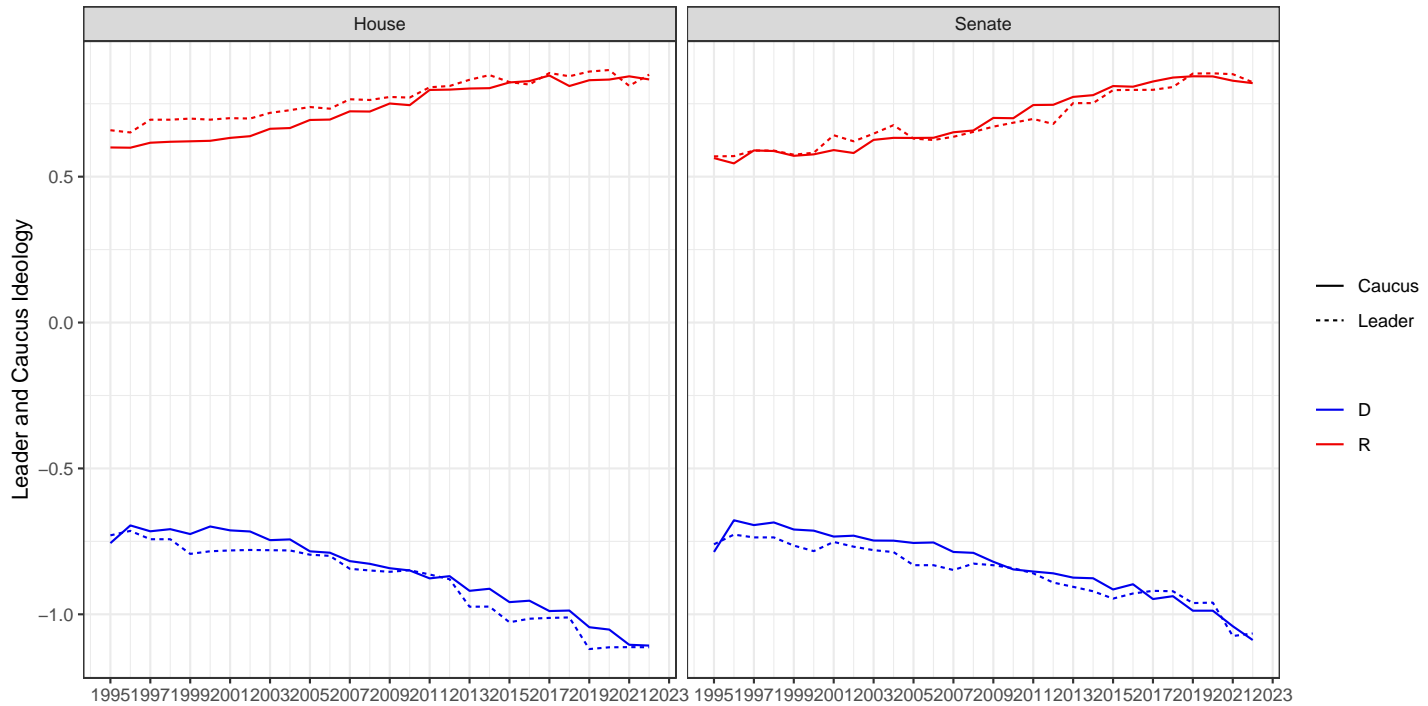
We turn to exploring trends in the data. The upper portion of Figure 2 plots the scores over time, and is

consistent with well-known trends in state legislative polarization (Shor and McCarty 2011). Both leaders and caucuses are getting more extreme over time, and this is true for both parties.

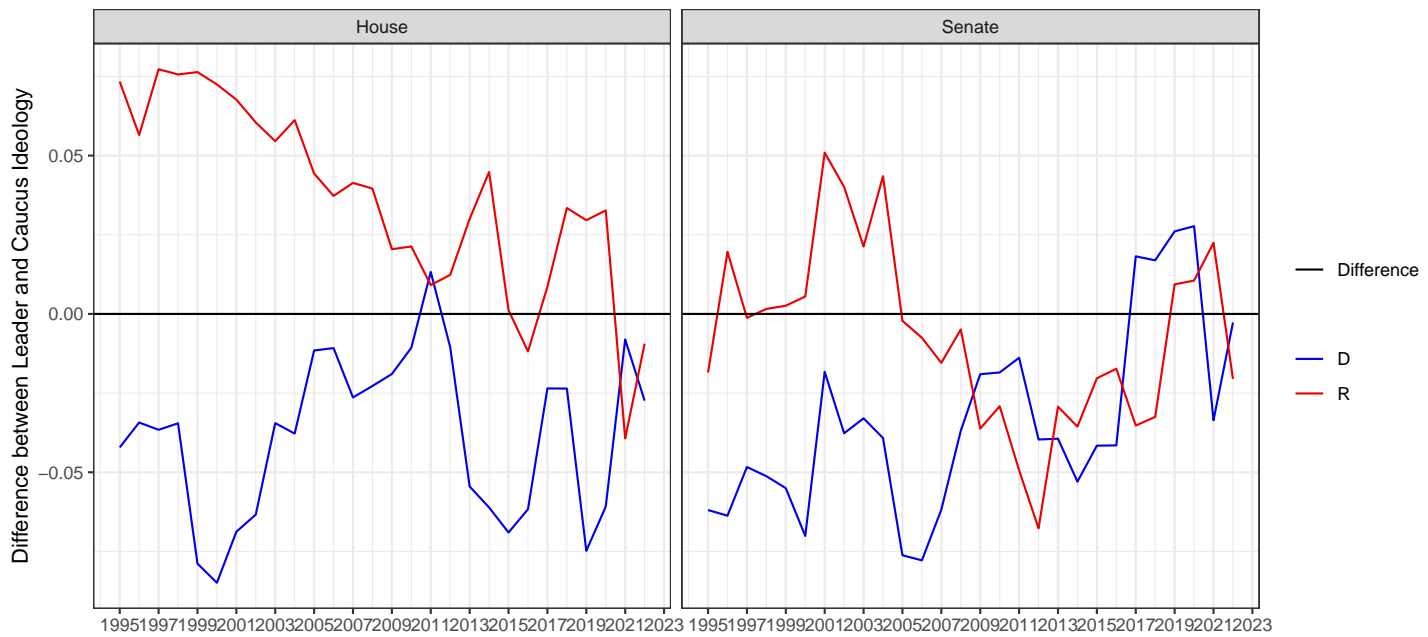
The lower portion of Figure 2 plots the differences between the caucuses over time. It makes clear that the differences between leaders and caucuses have become smaller over time, despite some idiosyncratic variation. Senate Republicans have been more liberal than their caucuses since 2007.

Figure 3 shows trends in the differences over time, disaggregated by leader type. The unusually moderate Republican Senate Presidents are very obvious; this has been true since 2001.

Finally, Figure 4 shows both the centrism and heterogeneity of trends across state in the divergence between leaders and their caucuses.



(a) Scores



(b) Differences

Figure 2: Leadership and caucus ideology trends over time, by chamber and party.

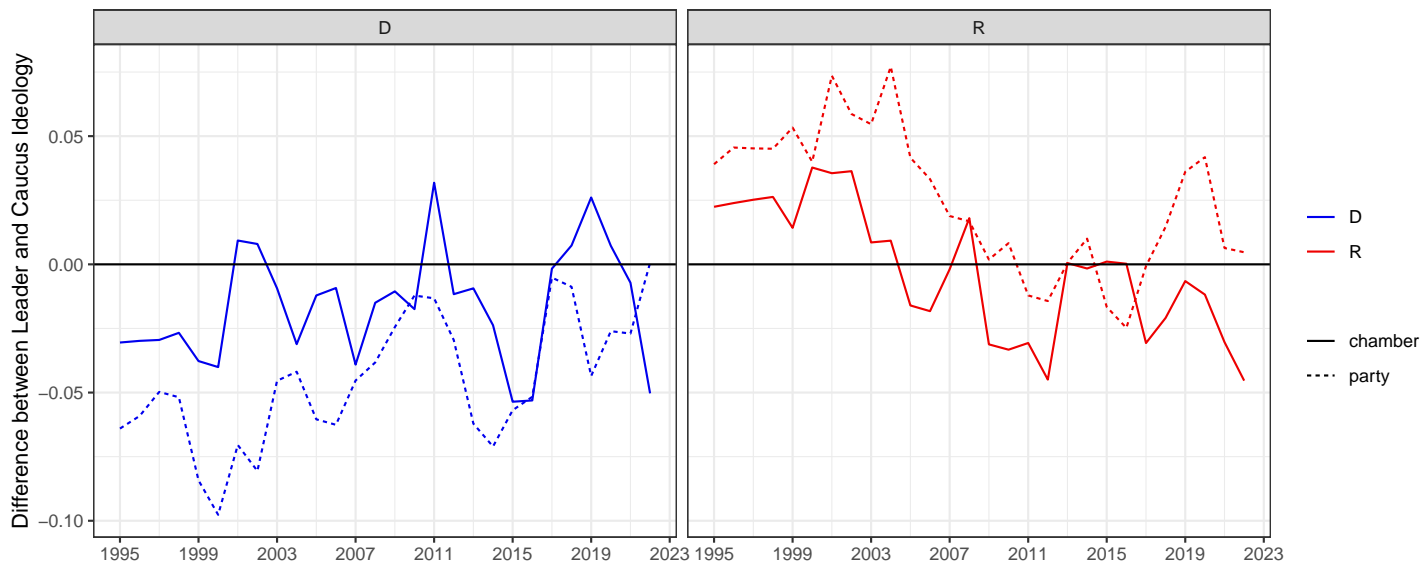


Figure 3: Leadership and caucus ideology trends over time, by party, and leader type.

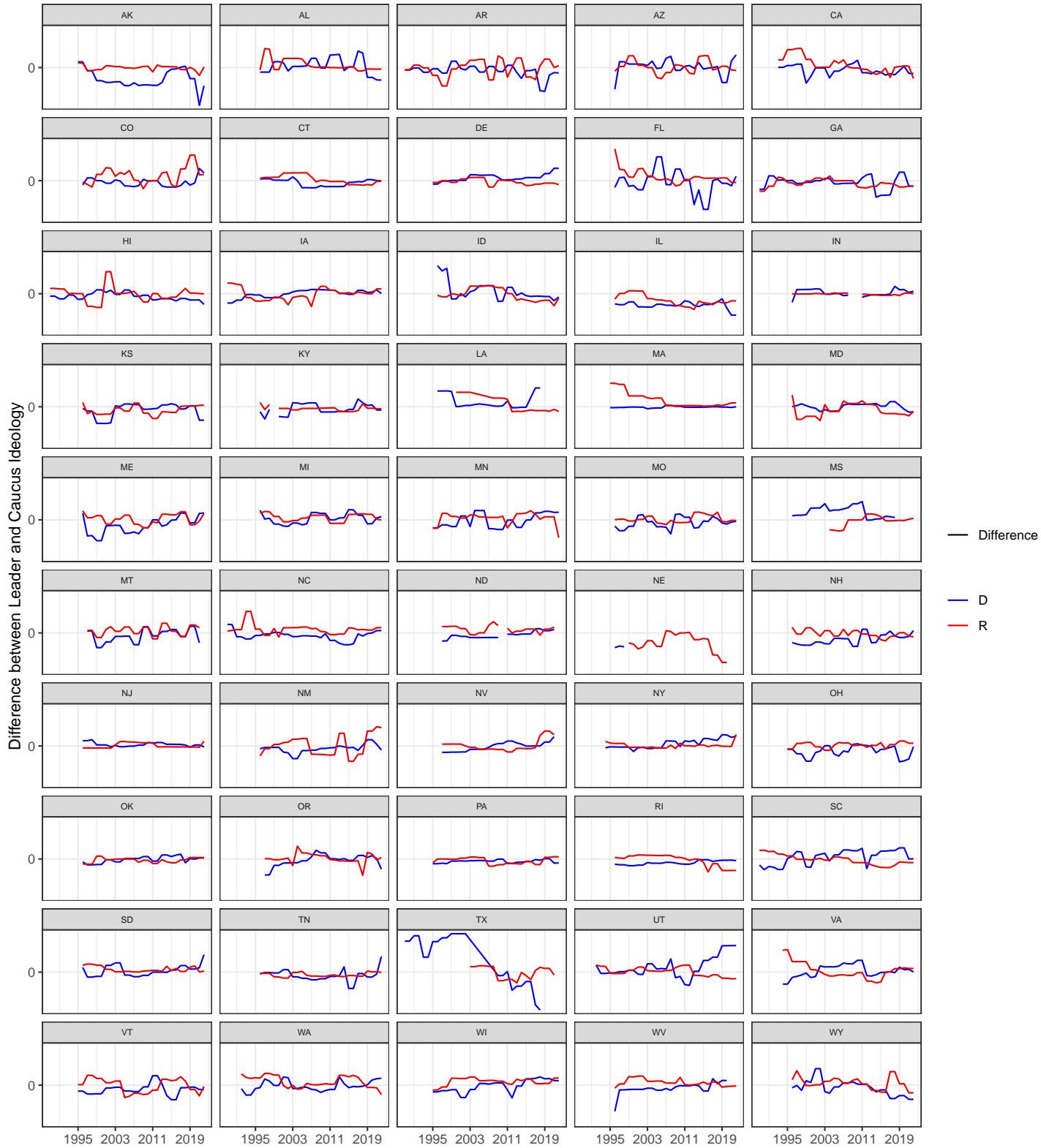


Figure 4: Leadership and caucus ideology trends over time, by party and state.

3 Methodology and Results

We need to conduct an appropriate test of the hypothesis that leaders are more extreme than their caucus. Following Jesse and Malhotra (2010), I conduct Monte Carlo simulations to test the hypothesis. The specific procedure is as follows. For each leader in my data, I select a simulated leader via a random uniform draw from their party caucus and subtract the distance between the hypothetical leader and the caucus median. I repeat this process 10,000 times for each of the 8,079 leader-years in my data.

3.1 Absolute Distances: Centrism Hypothesis

Figures 5 shows the simulated draws graphically for all leaders, Figure 6 for party leaders, and Figure 7 for chamber leaders only. All three sets of plots show the same thing: actual leaders, denoted by vertical lines, are very far from the simulated distributions of leaders drawn randomly from party caucuses. Leaders are essentially centrists.

Table 1 summarizes the p -values disaggregated by chamber, party, and leader type, and is merely a more concise summary of the graphical results. In all 12 possible cells, p -values are below any conventional threshold of statistical significance. In other words, we can reject the null hypothesis of random selection in favor of the alternative hypothesis of centrist leaders for essentially all types of leaders.

Table 1: Monte Carlo p -values

		House		Senate	
		R	D	R	D
All Leaders	p-value	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000
Party Leaders	p-value	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000
Chamber Leaders	p-value	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000

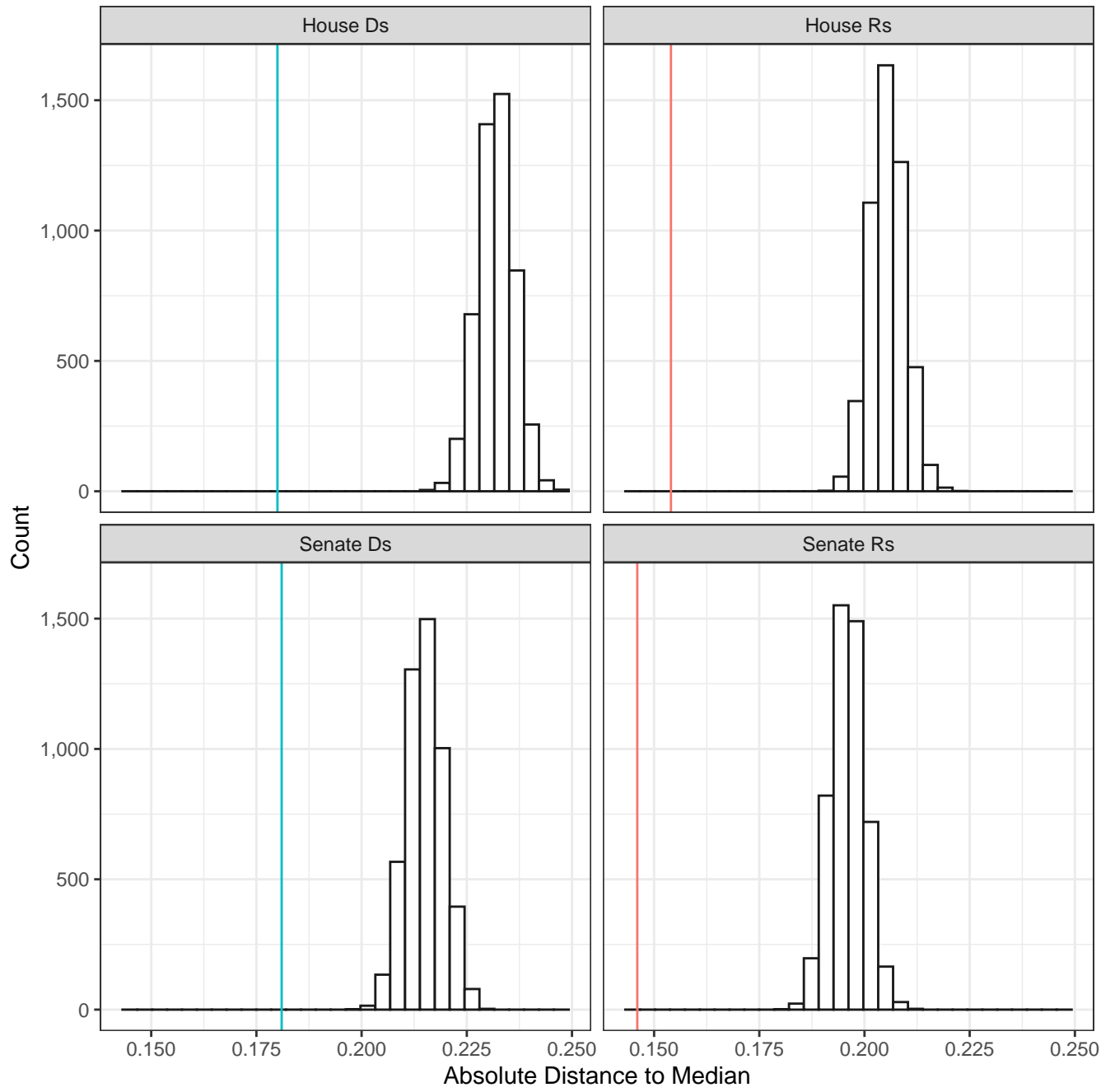


Figure 5: Monte Carlo Simulated All Leaders and Distances from Caucus Medians

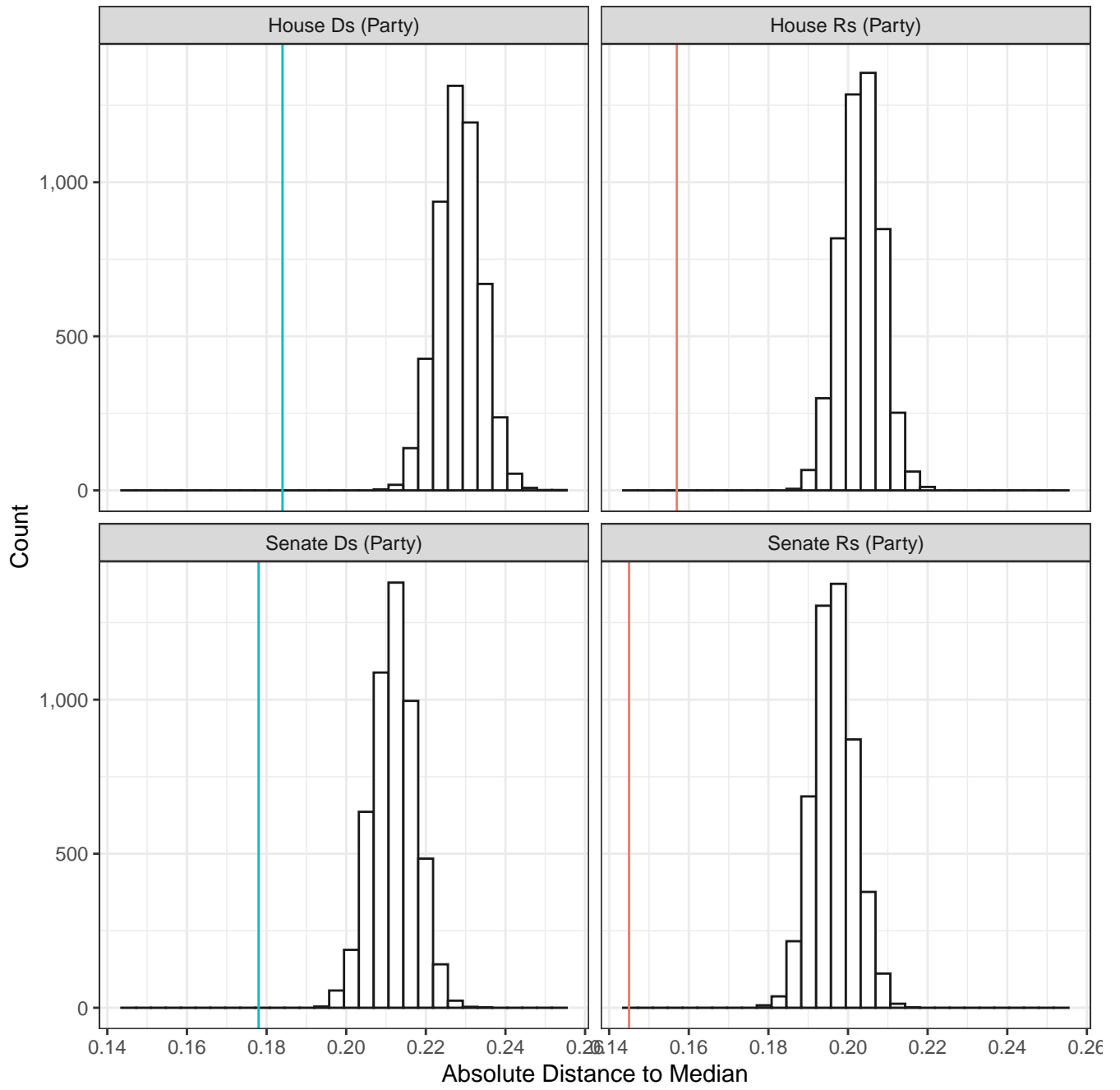


Figure 6: Monte Carlo Simulated Party Leaders and Distances from Caucus Medians

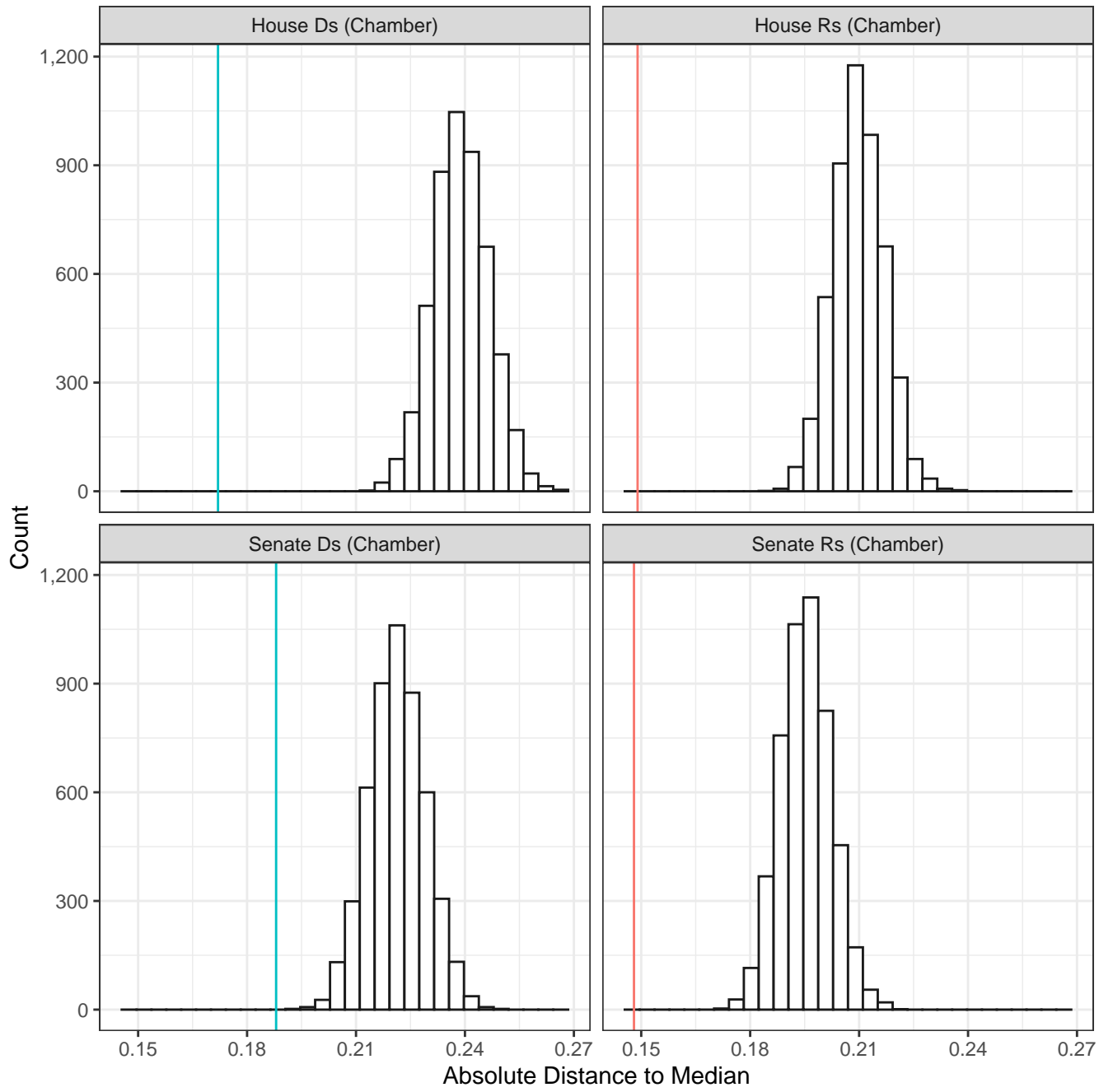


Figure 7: Monte Carlo Simulated Chamber Leaders and Distances from Caucus Medians

3.2 Signed Distances: Extremism Hypothesis

Next we examine the hypothesis Figures 8 shows the simulated draws graphically for all leaders, Figure 9 for party leaders, and Figure 10 for chamber leaders only. All three sets of plots show the same thing: actual leaders, denoted by vertical lines, are pretty close to the center of the simulated distributions of leaders drawn randomly from party caucuses.

To generate a p -value for hypothesis testing, I calculate the difference between the average signed distance between the actual leaders and their caucus medians and the average signed distance between 10,000 sets of simulated leaders and the caucus medians. I average the difference between these two distances for all 10,000 simulations. A lower p -value means it is less likely that random chance has produced a Democratic (Republican) leader as liberal (conservative) as the one we actually observe.

Tables 2 and 3 summarizes the p -values disaggregated by chamber, party, and leader type for two sets of tests: extreme values in the leftward direction, and extreme values in the rightward direction. The results are nuanced. Table 2 shows that for Democrats, almost all types of leaders are statistically more left-wing than we would expect to happen by chance, with the exception of Senate Democratic chamber leaders. At the same time, it shows how left-wing Republican Senate chamber and party leaders are.

Table 2: Monte Carlo p -values (extreme left hypothesis)

		House		Senate	
		R	D	R	D
All Leaders	p-value	0.9990	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000
Party Leaders	p-value	1.0000	0.0000	0.0446	0.0000
Chamber Leaders	p-value	0.2618	0.0126	0.0002	0.1750

Table 3 says that House Republican party leaders are the only leaders who are consistently right wingers. Republican chamber leaders, and Senate Republican party leaders are not. No Democratic leaders are consistently conservative.

Table 3: Monte Carlo *p*-values (extreme right hypothesis)

		House		Senate	
		R	D	R	D
All Leaders	p-value	0.0010	1.0000	1.0000	1.0000
Party Leaders	p-value	0.0000	1.0000	0.9554	1.0000
Chamber Leaders	p-value	0.7382	0.9874	0.9998	0.8250

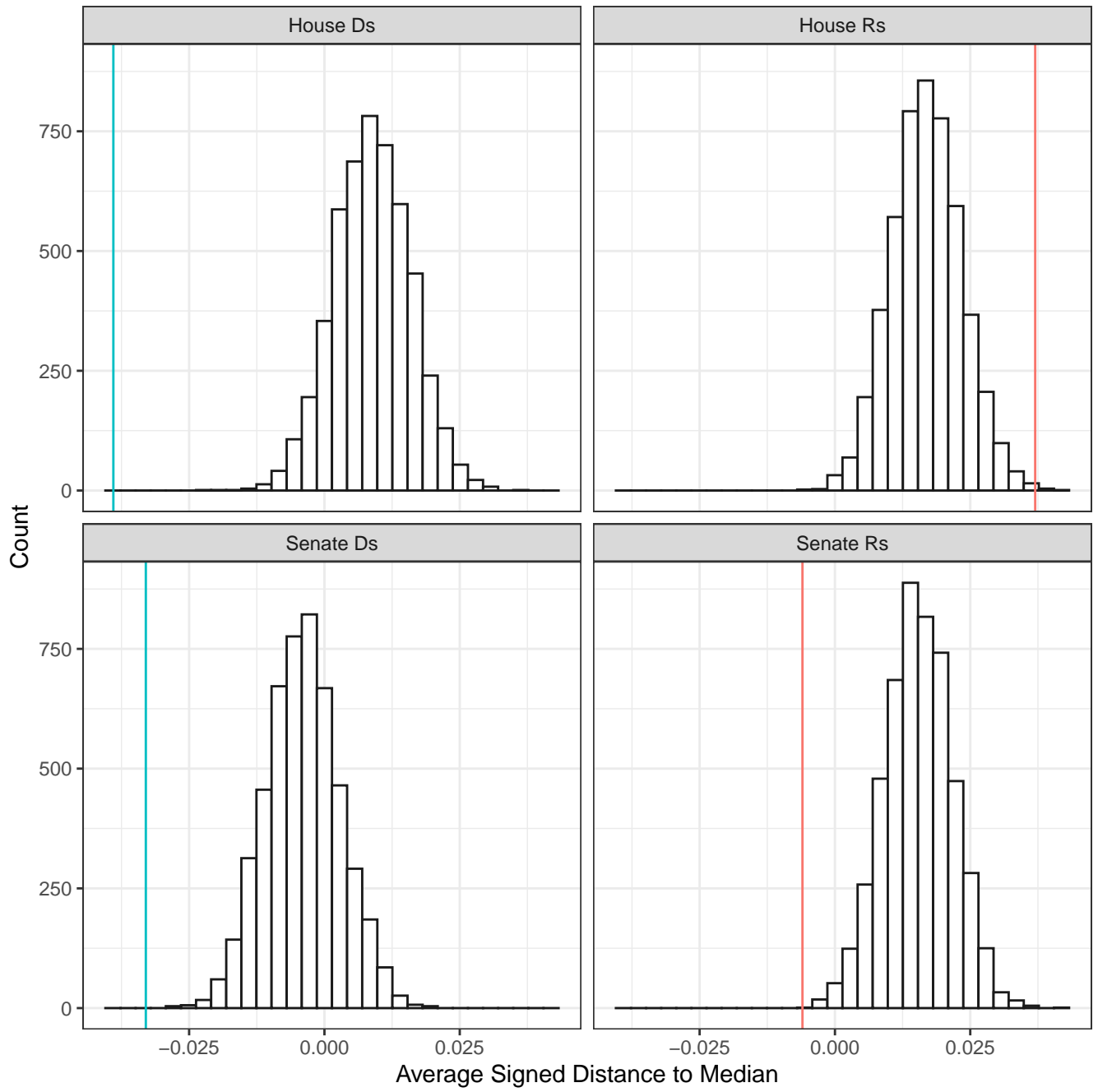


Figure 8: Monte Carlo Simulated All Leaders and Distances from Caucus Medians

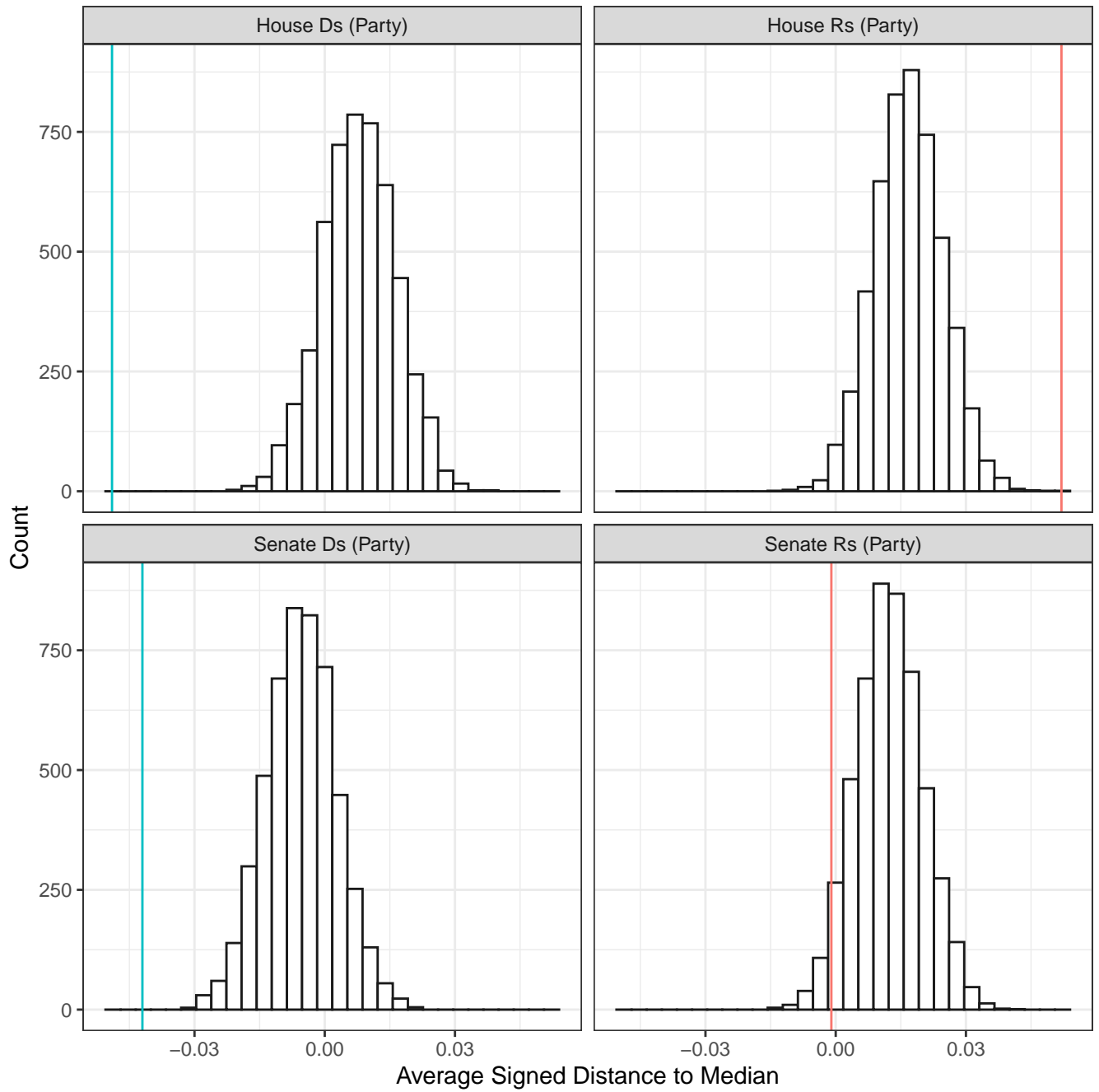


Figure 9: Monte Carlo Simulated Party Leaders and Distances from Caucus Medians

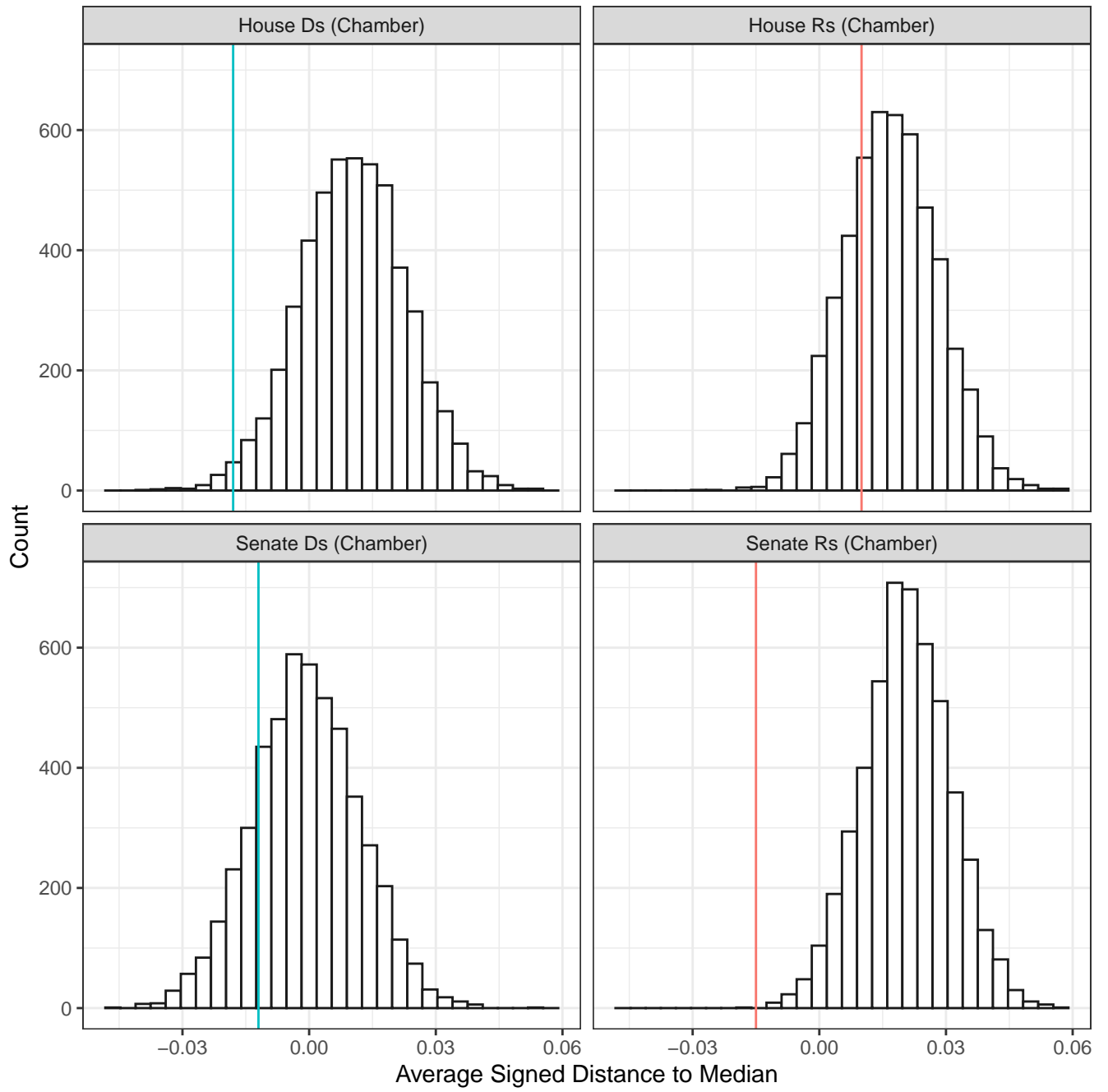


Figure 10: Monte Carlo Simulated Chamber Leaders and Distances from Caucus Medians

4 Explanatory Models

If the previous section had not rejected the null hypothesis of random leader selection, we would have ended the exercise right there. But leader selection is not random; leaders are centrist, but they shade in one direction or another. And the distance between leaders and caucuses is pretty variable, even if it is small on average. So what explains that divergence? A study of Congress would not have enough power to address the question, but state legislatures are a whole different story.

What factors could be important? We start with a basic consideration of intraparty heterogeneity, a factor most notably highlighted in Rohde (1991) and the theory of *conditional party government*. The idea is that party leadership would be most active—and responsible—when party preferences are most homogenous. Alternatively, an internally divided party would not devolve much responsibility to leadership.

I consider a complementary idea: that the ideological positioning of leaders themselves—not just the policies they push—is itself a function of party heterogeneity. When parties are homogeneous, there is agreement and tight control on the direction of the party. When parties are heterogeneous, leaders can drift away from the center of the party.

Next, we examine the idea that polarization might be related to leader-caucus divergence. Note that polarization is measured as the distance *between* parties. The idea here is that as the parties polarize, the incentive for moderation and cooperation begins to diminish, and the leash that the caucus exerts on its leaders weakens. This allows them to diverge, if only slightly, in the predictably extreme direction.

Now we move to a multivariate model. The dependent variable is the signed distance between leaders and their caucuses. We run separate models by party to capture possible party asymmetries, and to account for the fact that Democratic distances crowd to the left of the caucus, and Republican distances crowd to the right. Our main predictors of interest are intraparty divergence and polarization and their interactions with majority party status.

Controls are included as well. The first of these are chamber type (to account for chamber differences seen earlier). Some chambers are very occasionally tied. In that situation, it is common for the parties to agree on co-leaders. We should expect that mutual agreement would predict moderation for co-leaders relative to traditional majority-controlled chambers. An indicator (“Junior”) for leaders below the level of Speaker and Senate President to account for the possibility that top leadership positioning works systematically differently from lower level leadership. Similarly, the “Party” leader indicator allows for party leaders and chamber leaders to be differently positioned, which we found in earlier in this paper. Chamber leaders have to get legislation past a chamber median significantly more moderate than party medians. This should curb parties’ desires to nominate extreme chamber leaders.

Table 4 shows the results of multilevel models of ideological divergence for Democrats and Republicans. Varying intercepts are included for states, years, and leaders. These would account for unmodeled systematic differences at these levels. Positive coefficients for Republicans indicate predictors correlate with more conservative distances from the Republican party median, while the same is true in the negative direction for Democrats. Conversely, moderating factors would be indicated by positive coefficients for Democrats and negative ones for Republicans.

Multivariate results not only do generally support the hypothesized predictions, but *reverse* them. Polarization moderate the divergence of Democrats and Republicans. The polarization effect is amplified by minority party status/moderated by majority party status for both parties. Heterogeneity shows an asymmetry between the parties. Republicans in the majority and minority are moderated by intraparty heterogeneity, while Democrats (in the majority) are made more extreme by it.

The coefficient on party leaders is as predicted: they are more divergent and extreme than chamber leaders.

Table 4: Models of Leader-Caucus Divergence Divergence

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Divergence			
	D Majority (1)	D Minority (2)	R Majority (3)	R Minority (4)
Party (Not Chamber) Leader	-0.012*** (0.004)		0.017*** (0.003)	
Intraparty Heterogeneity	0.070** (0.033)	-0.091*** (0.031)	-0.066*** (0.024)	-0.201*** (0.016)
Chamber Polarization	0.239*** (0.008)	0.549*** (0.012)	-0.255*** (0.008)	-0.647*** (0.012)
Professionalization	0.004 (0.004)	-0.007 (0.006)	-0.001 (0.004)	-0.003 (0.005)
Constant	-0.376*** (0.030)	-0.882*** (0.041)	0.413*** (0.023)	1.021*** (0.060)
Observations	2,330	1,281	2,606	1,128
Log Likelihood	3,098.372	1,415.294	3,380.398	1,503.319
Akaike Inf. Crit.	-6,180.745	-2,816.588	-6,744.795	-2,992.639
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	-6,134.716	-2,780.500	-6,697.871	-2,957.441

Note:

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

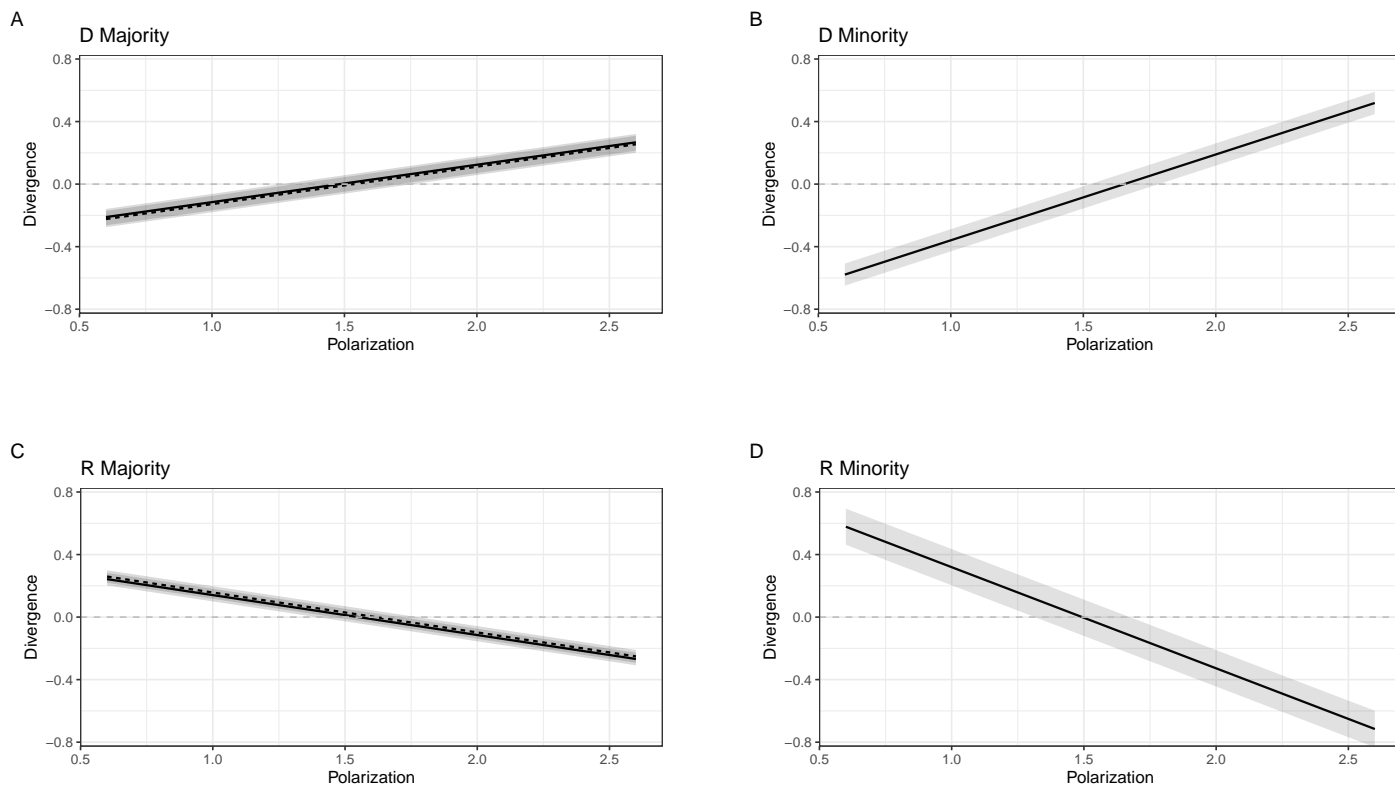


Figure 11: Marginal effects plot of polarization on leadership divergence from party caucus. Plot is faceted by leadership majority status and party.

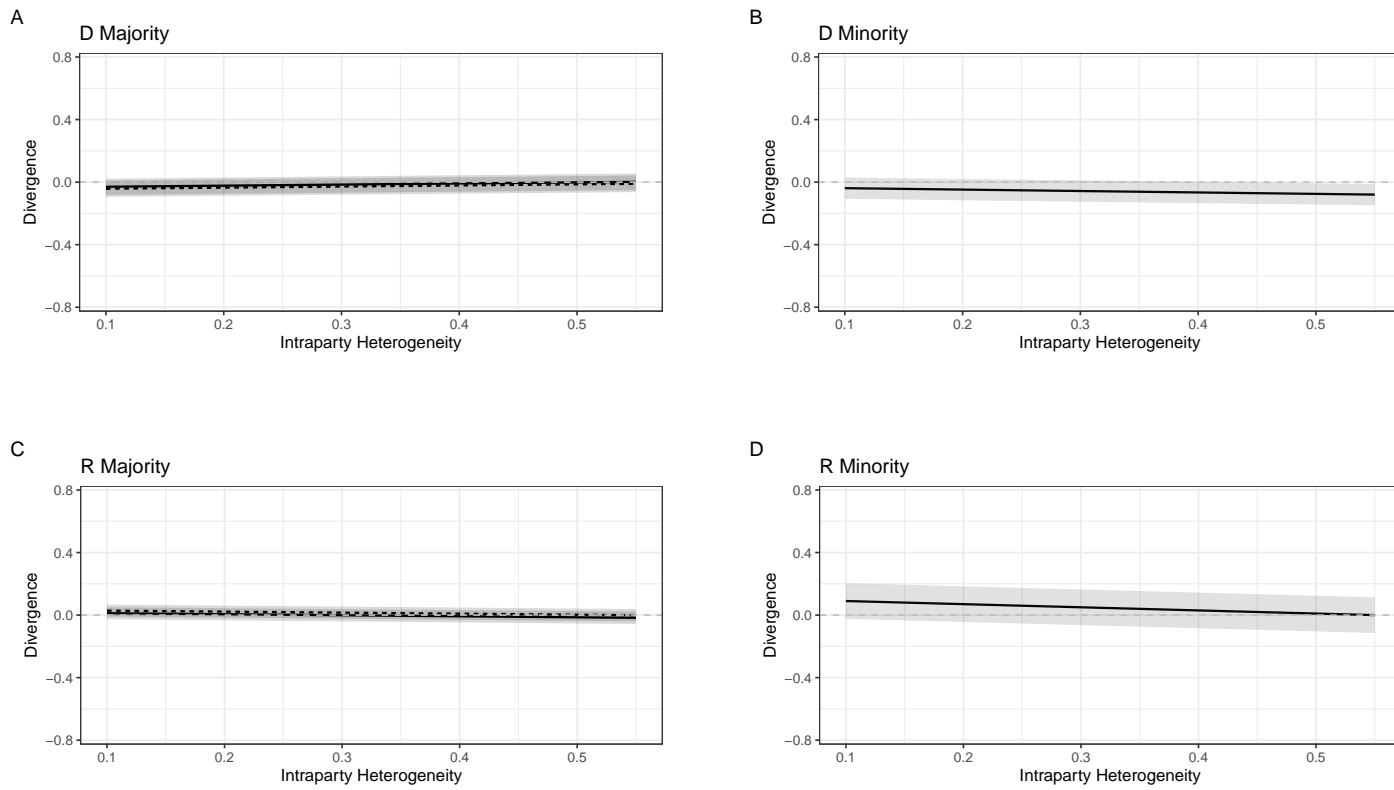


Figure 12: Marginal effects plot of intraparty heterogeneity on leadership divergence from party caucus. Plot is faceted by leadership majority status and party.

5 Leader Candidates

We move on from considering to consider leader elections. While these are often uncontested, leaders in the state often have quite short tenures. This is partly, but not entirely, due to term limits. We have 921 unique leader candidates who are mentioned in news articles regarding elections for chamber leadership (Speaker for the lower chamber, President for the upper).

Figure 13 shows some party asymmetry. Republican losers and winners are, on average, centrists. On the other hand, Democratic winners lean left, and losers slightly right.

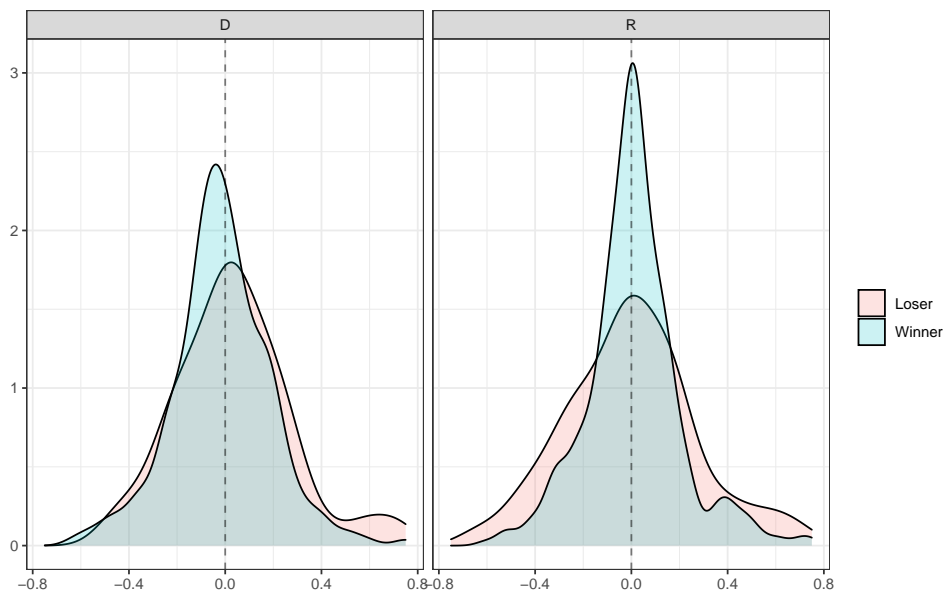


Figure 13: Density plot of winning and losing candidates for chamber leadership. Plot is faceted by majority party.

Let's switch to pairwise comparisons. We divide leader candidates within each party into ideological quintiles. Figure 14 shows that in chamber leader contests, the middlemost candidate is disproportionately likely to weakly win (tie or win). However, Republican leadership contests are substantially more likely (by 10 percentage points) to feature such a centrist outcome.

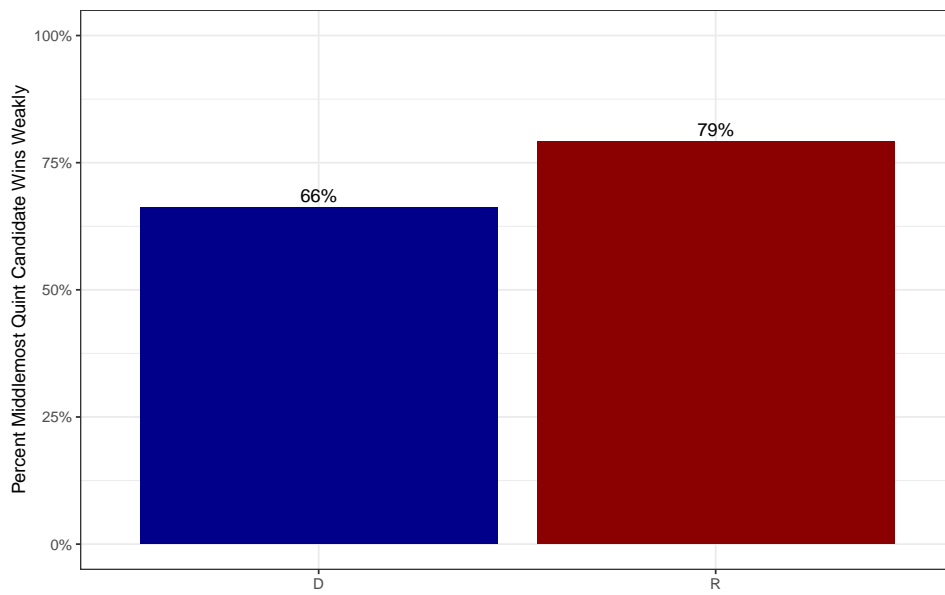


Figure 14: Bar chart of the percentage of the time the middlemost quintile candidate wins a leadership election. Plot is faceted by majority party.

6 Discussion

On average, state legislative leaders are centrists. This is true for both Democrats and Republicans, and whether they are party or chamber leaders. Yet, at the same time as they are centrists, leaders typically shade to one side or another. Democrats are the familiar type: they are left-wingers with respect to their parties. Republicans, on the other hand, are only right-wingers with respect to their party in the lower chamber (House). In the upper chamber (Senate), Republicans are actually left-wingers. This finding is wholly unexpected, and at odds with the evidence from Congress. Why would Republican party members choose party liberals to run their Senates? It's unclear.

Of course centrism is only in relation to the party caucus. As polarization increases, the caucuses drift apart from each other, and leaders drift towards extremes automatically. It is merely the case that they are no more extreme, on average, than the parties that elect them as leaders.

Finally, intraparty heterogeneity and polarization are strong (negative) predictors of divergence. More heterogeneity leads Democrats and Republicans to select less divergent and more moderate leadership, and especially so when they are in the majority. More polarization leads both parties to also select less divergent leadership, for reasons that are as yet unclear.

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