# Unaffiliated Voters and Crossover Voting in Semi-Closed Primaries: The Case of Rhode Island

Matthew P. Thornburg

University of South Carolina Aiken

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Abstract

*A significant number of voters in Rhode Island engage in the costly practice of changing party registration after voting in primaries in order to maintain unaffiliated registration. I theorize that the semi-closed election laws of the state motivate this behavior by allowing unaffiliated voters to choose either the Democratic or Republican primary and engage in crossover voting. Voters who switch party registration post-primary routinely engage in crossover voting. In the state, these voters reside in municipalities where access to both party primaries is valuable.*

Primary crossover voting (and its elimination) serves as a perennial preoccupation of elected policymakers and pundits. The patchwork of state laws across the country regarding who can vote in party primaries results in no small part from different attitudes and experiences with "outsiders" voting in primary elections. This preoccupation stands in stark contrast to the academic literature, which finds crossover voting to be rare and inconsistent, especially in states with party registration (e.g., Norrander 2018). The unflattering picture political scientists paint of the American voter implies a lack of political sophistication among most individuals to make the necessary expected utility calculations regarding election outcomes, especially where the process of engaging in crossover voting is costly due to restrictions imposed by party registration. Research also suggests that social norms discourage crossover voting among partisans (Gerber et al. 2017).

In this paper, I present an apparent exception to this consensus in the state of Rhode Island. Rhode Island has party registration but conducts semi-closed primaries, allowing unaffiliated voters the freedom to choose the Democratic or Republican primary. However, this choice is costly: once unaffiliated voters participate in a party primary, they are considered registered with that party. Voters who wish to maintain the ability to choose their party primary as an unaffiliated voter may switch back to unaffiliated through the costly process of filling out a form at the polling place. The Rhode Island voter file tracks these changes in party registration and their date; thus we see the prevalence of the practice and who engages in it.

Using a 2011 copy of the Rhode Island voter file, I find that approximately 11% of those registered to vote in the state, comprising 16% of 2010 general election voters, engage in this practice, which I term "polling place switching". Their proportion of the primary electorate

varies from year to year, but averages 20% of primary voters in the 2006, 2008 presidential, 2008, and 2010 primary elections.

The large number of voters engaging in the costly process of changing party registration in order to remain unaffiliated belies the apparent consensus on strategic voting; these voters are willing to pay a significant cost to remain unaffiliated. To what end? I follow Thornburg's (2023) theory that unaffiliated party registration in semi-closed primaries provides significantly higher instrumental utility to voters because of the choice they receive to vote in either the Democratic or Republican primary. Therefore, many individuals choose to remain unaffiliated in order to receive this benefit and engage in crossover voting. I examine polling place switchers in the 2011 voter file who were registered before 2006 and voted in at least two party primaries out of the four recorded in the voter file. I find that almost half—46.3%--voted in at least one Democratic and one Republican primary among the 2006, 2008 presidential, 2008, and 2010 primary contests. This is a significant rate of crossover voting, especially compared to similar voters in the file who do not engage in polling place switching.

I examine the geographic distribution of polling place switching among Rhode Island's 39 municipalities. I theorize that polling place switching is most useful for voters in Rhode Island municipalities that are competitive or Republican leaning. In these locations, the ability to choose the Democratic or Republican primary is most valuable in a state with a strong Democratic lean but where local primary elections may have Republicans competitive for the general election. I find a strong negative correlation ($r$ = -0.54) between the proportion of primary voters who are polling place switchers in a municipality and that municipality's 2012 two-party Democratic presidential vote share.

I also theorize this relationship will be stronger among those voting in Democratic primaries than those voting in Republican primaries (assumed to mostly be Democrats and Republicans, respectively. I find that the proportion of 2010 Democratic primary voters who are polling place switchers has a much stronger relationship to municipality partisanship compared to the proportion of 2010 Republican primary voters who are polling place switchers ($r$ = -0.67 vs. $r$ = -0.26), in support of this theory.

While these results are suggestive, the present analysis has limitations primarily stemming from lack of information about individual voter party identification. Future research should incorporate individual-level survey data.

*Theory and Literature*

A stark contrast exists between the importance accorded to primary crossover voting by elected officials and pundits compared to academic scholars. While primary crossover voting undoubtedly exists in American elections, recent nationwide analysis using the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) finds only approximately 10% of voters in party primaries are pure independents or supporters of the opposite party, combined (Norrander 2018). Examining earlier studies, Burden and Jones (2009) find primary crossover voters (including independents) compose between 18% and 49% of the primary electorate.

Related literature on primary turnout attributes the decision to vote in a party primary to factors such as the competitiveness of the contest and the partisan balance of the state (Ezra 2001; Hanks and Grofman1998; Jewell 1977; Kenney 1983; Kenney and Rice 1986). Generally speaking, the less competitive the general election and the more competitive the primary election, the greater number of voters will vote in the contest most likely to yield the eventual officeholder.

The notion of "raiding" the opposition primary to nominate a weak candidate draws particularly little support. Even where celebrities attempt to coordinate raiding, such as Rush Limbaugh's "Operation Chaos" in the 2008 Democratic presidential primary, there is little evidence voters engage in the practice (Stephenson 2011). Where independents or partisan identifiers/leaners from the other party vote in a party's primary elections, their intention seems more benign: to nominate their most preferred candidate of that party in case their own party's nominee does not prevail in the general election.

On the related question of whether primary crossover voting changes the outcome of elections, the fears of elected officials (and hopes of reformers looking for a solution to political polarization) seem overblown. A subsection of this literature focuses on the effect of primary election laws on primary outcomes, theorizing that more restrictive primaries (i.e., "closed") lead to the nomination of the extreme candidates by excluding moderates, independents, and crossover voters. The most conclusive study to date by McGhee et al. (2014) finds no difference.

At the same time, a thread of literature exists suggesting that some voters engage in strategic party registration in closed and semi-closed states to facilitate primary crossover voting. This is mainly attractive in places where one political party has a clear majority and the general election is not usually competitive. Key (1949) observed North Carolina Republicans registering as Democrats so that they could vote in the critical Democratic primary that he described as "in reality the election" in the South at the time. Arrington and Grofman (1999) also find that aggregate party registration totals in North Carolina counties understate the weaker party's support at the ballot box. In essence, the party that was electorally weaker in that part of that state had fewer voters registered with it relative to the votes it received in the general election. Arrington and Grofman (1999) call this phenomenon "hidden partisanship."

This line of research continues with Thornburg (2023) who examines party registration in states with semi-closed primaries. The author finds that the introduction of semi-closed primaries leads to an increase among unaffiliated voters and theorizes that the attractiveness of choosing one's primary in these states persuades even partisan identifiers and leaners to remain unaffiliated. This choice is especially attractive to voters identifying with the weaker party in a state who gain access to the dominant party's primary elections with semi-closed rules. Thornburg finds significant levels of crossover voting among unaffiliated Democrats (Republicans) in semi-closed red (blue) states.

The phenomenon of polling place switching appears to confirm the value of primary choice to some voters. Although state rules in Rhode Island make the practice costly, individuals are willing to reregister as unaffiliated voters in order to maintain the choice of primary. I theorize that polling place switchers engage in significantly greater amounts of crossover voting compared to those who do not switch their party registration back to unaffiliated after voting.

I also theorize that polling place switching is most useful for voters in Rhode Island municipalities that are competitive or Republican leaning. In these locations, the ability to choose the Democratic or Republican primary is most valuable in a state with a strong Democratic lean but where local primary elections may have Republicans competitive for the general election.

This relationship will be stronger among those voting in Democratic primaries than those voting in Republican primaries (assumed to mostly be Democrats and Republicans, respectively). In blue Rhode Island, among Democrats, any polling place switching will mainly be attractive in competitive and Republican-leaning cities where the ability to vote in the GOP primary may be important. Democrats living in blue areas of the state (such as Providence) will

rarely encounter a GOP primary where it makes instrumental sense to vote because the statewide Democratic primary nominees will almost always be competitive in the general election and the winner of the Democratic primary nomination in local contests will be likely to win the election.

In contrast, I theorize that Republicans will be little affected by the partisan lean of their city. Because they live in a Democratic state overall, polling place switching will be valuable regardless of the partisan lean of their municipality. Levels of Republican polling place switching should be relatively high across all cities.

*Polling Place Switchers and Date of Privilege in the Rhode Island Voter File*

Every state administers its elections differently, and Rhode Island's unique primary rules require some explanation. As a semi-closed primary state, Rhode Island allows voters who are unaffiliated on primary election day to choose the Democratic or Republican primary. However, should the unaffiliated vote in a primary, their party registration is automatically changed to the party of the primary they voted in. The state provides and accepts "Change of Party Designation" forms at polling places on election day, allowing voters who wish to change their party registration back to unaffiliated to do so easily.

To further complicate matters, the state specifies a date when a change in a voter's party registration takes effect. This differs for unaffiliated voters changing to affiliated with a party and those registered as Democrats and Republicans who are changing party registration. In the former case, voters may switch from unaffiliated to one of the major parties and immediately vote in that party primary. Essentially, the semi-closed primary in Rhode Island is possible because unaffiliated voters may immediately affiliate with a political party on primary election day and vote in a primary. Thus, when someone last switched from unaffiliated to a political party, the Date of Privilege is the day they switch from unaffiliated to the party. However,

individuals switching from Democratic or Republican registration (either to another party or to unaffiliated) must wait 30 days before the privilege of their new party registration takes effect.[1] This feature is designed to prevent Democrats or Republicans from switching to the other party at the last minute and voting in its primary. The Rhode Island state voter file includes the date the voter's most recent change to party registration became effective as Date of Privilege. Through this field, we see the most recent time a voter changed their party registration and can infer it was either on the Date of Privilege (if changing from unaffiliated to their current party registration) or 30 days prior (if changing from a major party to their current party registration).

I tallied the number of voters with each recorded Date of Privilege in a 2011 copy of the Rhode Island voter file and plot these changes in Figure 1 to look for patterns. Immediately apparent are four major "spikes" indicating thousands of Rhode Islanders changed their party registration on the same day. The vast majority of the voters with these four Dates of Privilege were listed in the voter file as unaffiliated, suggesting that they changed from one of the political parties before and therefore had to wait for 90 days before their unaffiliated registration became effective. Backdating these dates 90 days, they correspond exactly to the dates of the 2006 state primary, 2008 presidential primary, 2008 primary, and 2010 primary. It is also important to remember that the Date of Privilege field only records the *most recent* change in a voter's party registration, meaning for example that the voters changing party in the 2010 "spike" could have done so in the earlier primary elections as well.

To get a sense of the scale of this behavior, I designate all individuals with these four Dates of Privilege as "polling place switchers". These voters comprise approximately 10.6% of all registrants in the 2011 Rhode Island voter file. Among voters who participated in the 2010

[1] This "waiting period" was 90 days until recently and was 90 days for the copy of the voter file analyzed in this paper.

general election, they comprise 15.5%. Unsurprisingly, they also comprise a significant share of voters who voted in primary elections. Table 1 lists the percentage of voters in the 2006, 2008 presidential, 2008, and 2010 primaries who are polling place switchers. Polling place switchers are between 14.2% and 25.3% of all primary voters in the four elections in the 2011 voter file, and generally comprise about 20% of those casting a ballot in the primary.

| Election | Percentage Polling Place Switchers |
|---|---|
| 2006 Primary | 25.3% |
| 2008 Presidential Primary | 20.8% |
| 2008 Primary | 14.2% |
| 2010 Primary | 20.9% |

Table 1: Percentage of Primary Electorates Comprised of Polling Place Switchers, 2011 Rhode Island Voter File

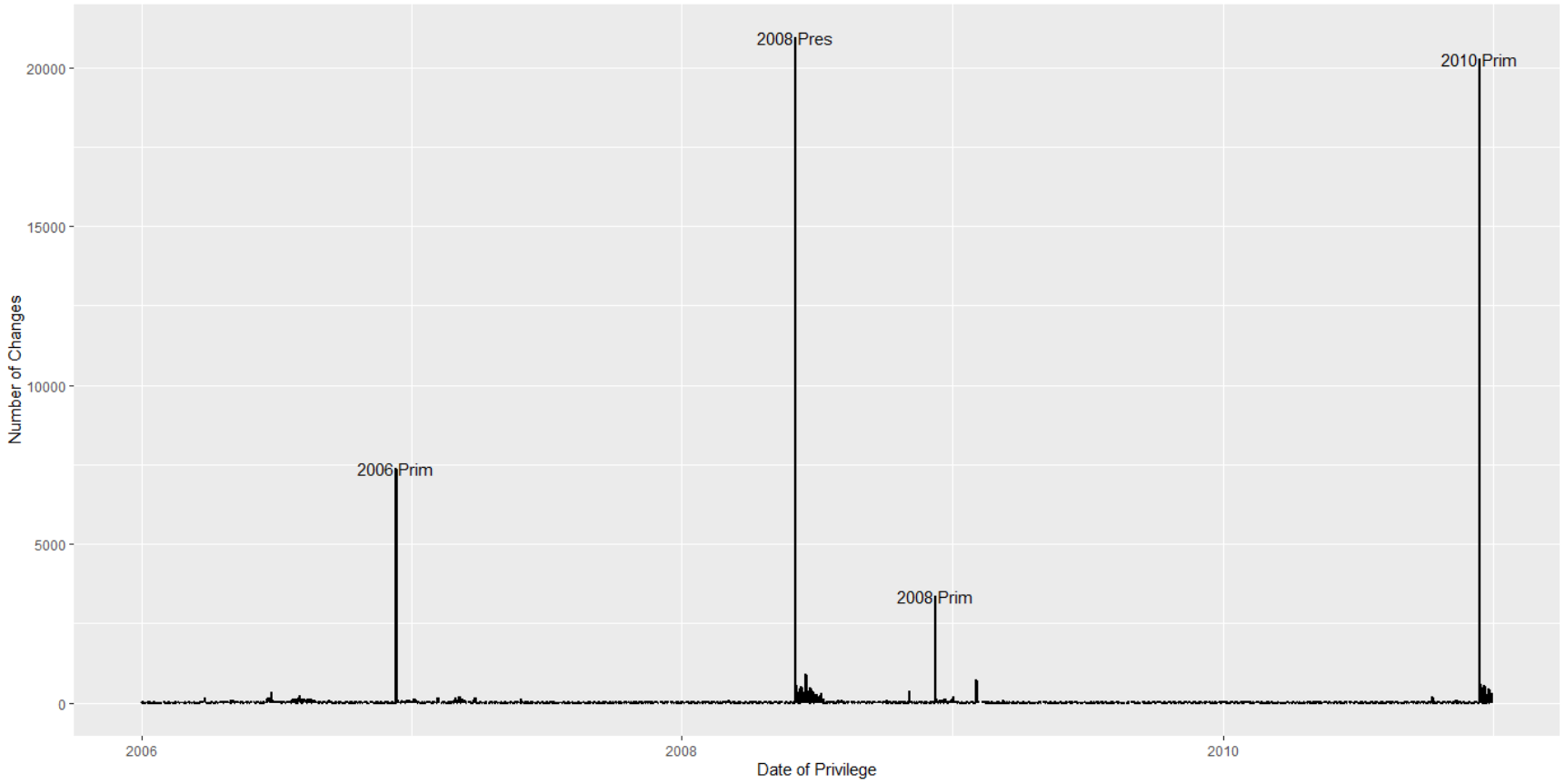


Figure 1: Date of Privilege Changes to Party Registration, 2011 Rhode Island Voter File

While the voter file does not provide information about the party *identification* of registrants and voters, the Rhode Island file's voter history lists primary turnout as well as the party of each primary in which a voter voted. Prior research suggests that voters in semi-closed states prize unaffiliated party registration because of the choice it affords voters (Thornburg 2023). If the choice of primary afforded by unaffiliated party registration drives voters to switch back to being unaffiliated after participating in a primary election, we expect polling place switchers to be more likely to switch between party primaries from one election to the next.

For the sake of comparison, I analyze all voters in the 2011 voter file who were registered to vote before January 1, 2006 and thus active registrants for the 2006, 2008, and 2010 election cycles and primaries. The mean number of the four primaries that polling place switchers in this analysis voted in was 1.86 compared to just 0.86 among non-switchers in the analysis. Among all polling place switchers in the analysis who voted in at least two of the four primaries (33,858 individuals), 46.53% voted in at least one Democratic primary *and* at least one Republican primary. This is much higher than the 9.33% of non-switchers who voted in at least two of the four primaries who voted in at least one Democratic primary and at least one Republican primary.

Notably for this copy of the voter file, the four primaries include one salient Republican contest and one especially salient Democratic contest. In 2006, moderate incumbent Republican US Senator Lincoln Chafee faced a strong challenge from his right by Steve Laffey. At the same time, the US Senate and gubernatorial Democratic primaries were largely uncompetitive in the state, leaving the Republican primary as the most salient contest. Unsurprisingly, the majority of polling place switchers voting in the 2006 primary participated in the Republican contest. 63.3% of all polling place switchers voting in the 2006 primary voted in the Republican primary. Put

another way, 30.7% of all polling place switchers in the 2011 voter file voted in the 2006 GOP primary.

On the Democratic side, the 2008 presidential primary was even more salient than the normal Democratic contest in blue Rhode Island. The primary took place on March 4, as John McCain was close to wrapping up the GOP nomination but during an historic and competitive Democratic contest between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. In this case, 84.9% of polling place switchers participating in the 2008 presidential primary in Rhode Island voted on the Democratic side. This was 49.3% of all polling place switchers in the 2011 voter file.

*Geographic Distribution of Polling Place Switching*

The phenomenon of polling place switching and crossover voting taking place among Rhode Islanders is surprising and theoretically interesting for two major reasons. First, the dominant scholarly consensus on primary crossover voting in American elections suggests that the American voter is relatively uninformed politically and lacks the political sophistication to engage in primary crossover voting on a large enough scale to affect election outcomes. The prevalence of polling place switching in the Rhode Island electorate, and the fact a significant number of switchers have voted in both party primaries, suggests that primary crossover voting—or at least strategic consideration of which primary to participate in—is common. Polling place switching is also surprising and theoretically interesting because it is a costly behavior in terms of effort required on the part of the voter. The calculus of voter turnout first postulated by Downs (1957) and Riker and Ordeshook (1968) suggests that voters balance costs and benefits in deciding whether to vote. Polling place switching requires voters to fill out a form to change their party registration and remain unaffiliated. The calculus of turnout thus suggests that voters engaging in this behavior must derive a significant benefit from it.

While we are approaching the limits of what we can learn from voter files without information on individual attitudes and demographics, we can use the geographic information in the voter file to evaluate where polling place switching among those voting in primaries is more or less common. Given the decentralized nature of government in the state and the small number of counties, I examine voters in individual municipalities in Rhode Island. I look at the 2010 primary (which was not uniquely salient for either party) and compute the proportion of voters participating in the Democratic and Republican primaries who are polling place switchers.

Figure 2 shows a scatterplot of the proportion of 2010 Democratic primary voters who are polling place switchers and the proportion of 2010 Republican primary voters who are polling place switchers in each municipality. There is a strong positive correlation between the two ($r = 0.83$) at the level of city. This correlation is partially driven by seven municipalities where almost no polling place switching takes place among either primary's voters, but even excluding these cities, there is an obvious positive relationship ($r = 0.59$); cities with many polling place switchers in the 2010 Democratic primary also have a significant number of switchers in the Republican primary.

While Rhode Island is an overwhelmingly Democratic state, there is some variation in its municipalities as to partisanship. I exploit this variation to test a theory of polling place switching. I theorize that polling place switching will be most common in Republican and competitive municipalities compared to Democratic ones in Rhode Island. Republicans benefit from polling place switching anywhere in the Democratic state, since the statewide Democratic primary nominees will almost always be competitive in the general election, incentivizing crossover voting. However, for Democrats any polling place switching will mainly be attractive in competitive and Republican-leaning cities where the ability to vote in the GOP primary may

be important. In contrast, Democrats living in blue areas of the state (such as Providence) will rarely encounter a GOP primary where it makes instrumental sense to vote because the statewide Democratic nominees will almost always be competitive in the general election and the winner of the Democratic nomination in local contests will be likely to win the election.

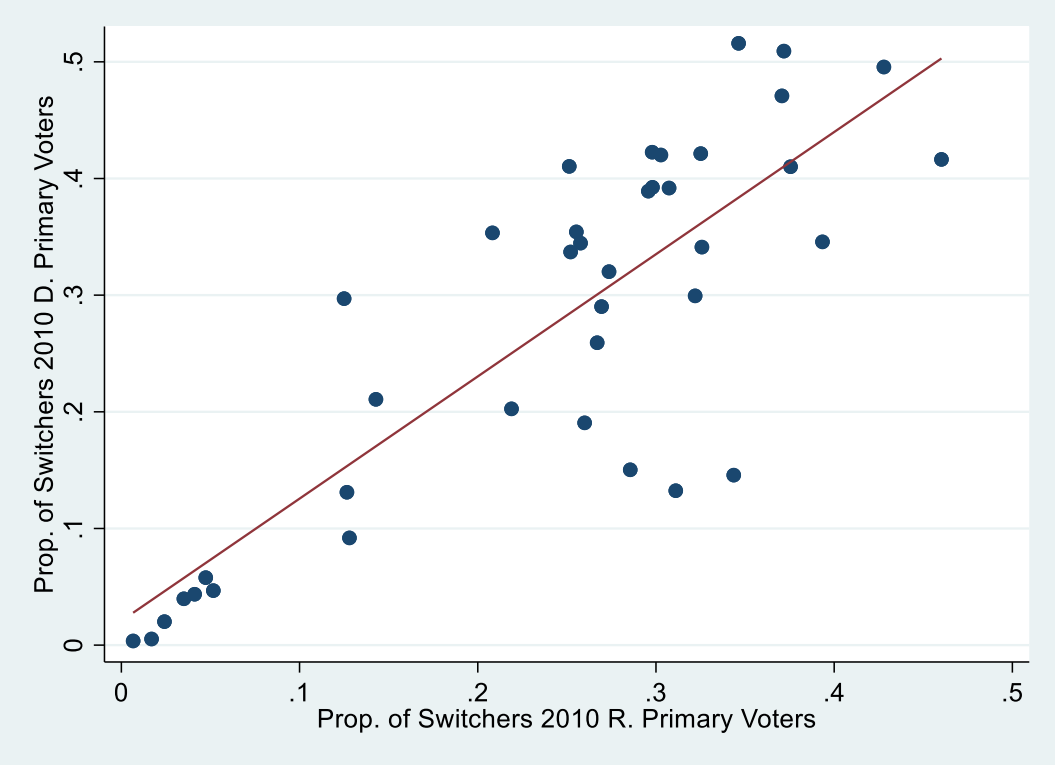


Figure 2: Proportion of Switchers in 2010 Democratic and Republican Primary by Municipality, 2011 Rhode Island Voter File

Figure 3 shows the relationship between the partisanship of the municipality and the proportion of Rhode Island registrants who voted in at least one primary in the 2011 voter file who are polling place switchers. To measure the partisan lean of the municipality, I compute the 2012 two-party presidential Democratic vote share for each city. I exclude the seven municipalities where almost no polling place switching takes place.

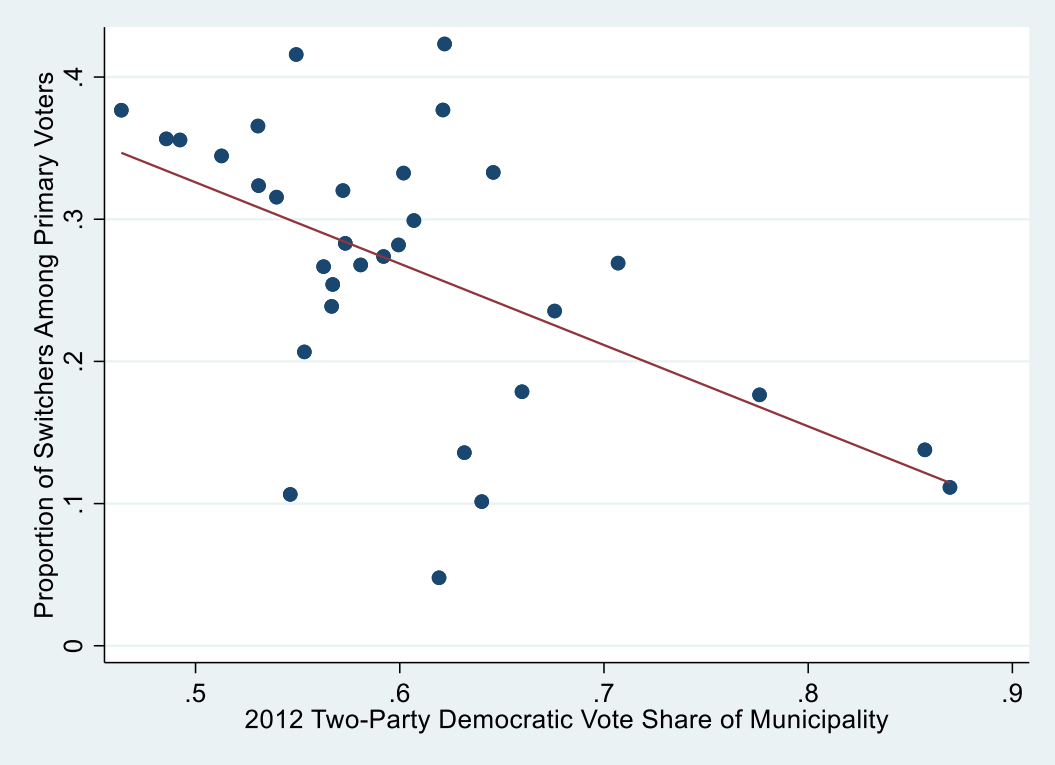


Figure 3: Proportion of Polling Place Switchers Among Primary Voters in Rhode Island Municipalities, 2011 Rhode Island Voter File

As expected, there is a correlation between the proportion of polling place switchers in Rhode Island municipalities and the 2012 two-party Democratic presidential vote share of the city ($r$ = -0.54). More Democratic municipalities see lower levels of polling place switching.

Finally, I break down prevalence of polling place switching between voters in the 2010 Democratic and Republican primaries and partisan lean of their municipality. Once again, I expect a strong negative relationship between proportion of Democratic primary voters (assumed to be Democrats) who are polling place switchers and the partisanship of their municipality. For Democrats, polling place switching only makes sense in Republican areas of the state and not Democratic ones. The relationship should be weaker for Republican primary voters (assumed to be Republicans).

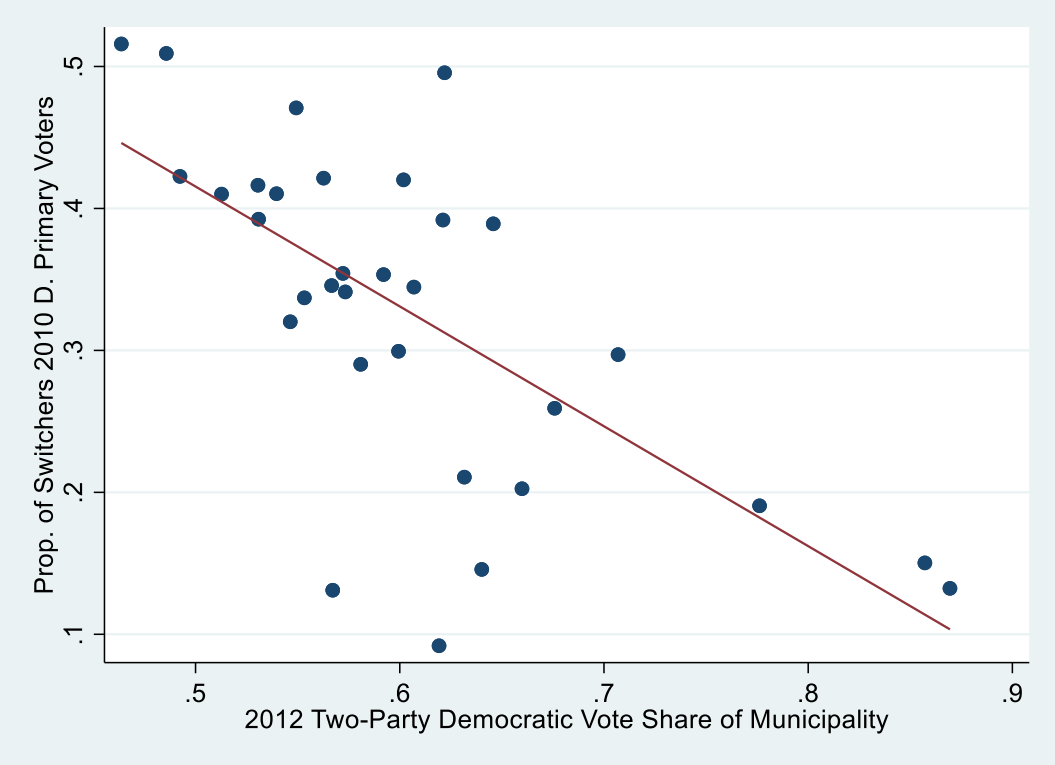


Figure 4: Proportion of Polling Place Switchers Among 2010 Democratic Primary Voters in Rhode Island Municipalities, 2011 Rhode Island Voter File

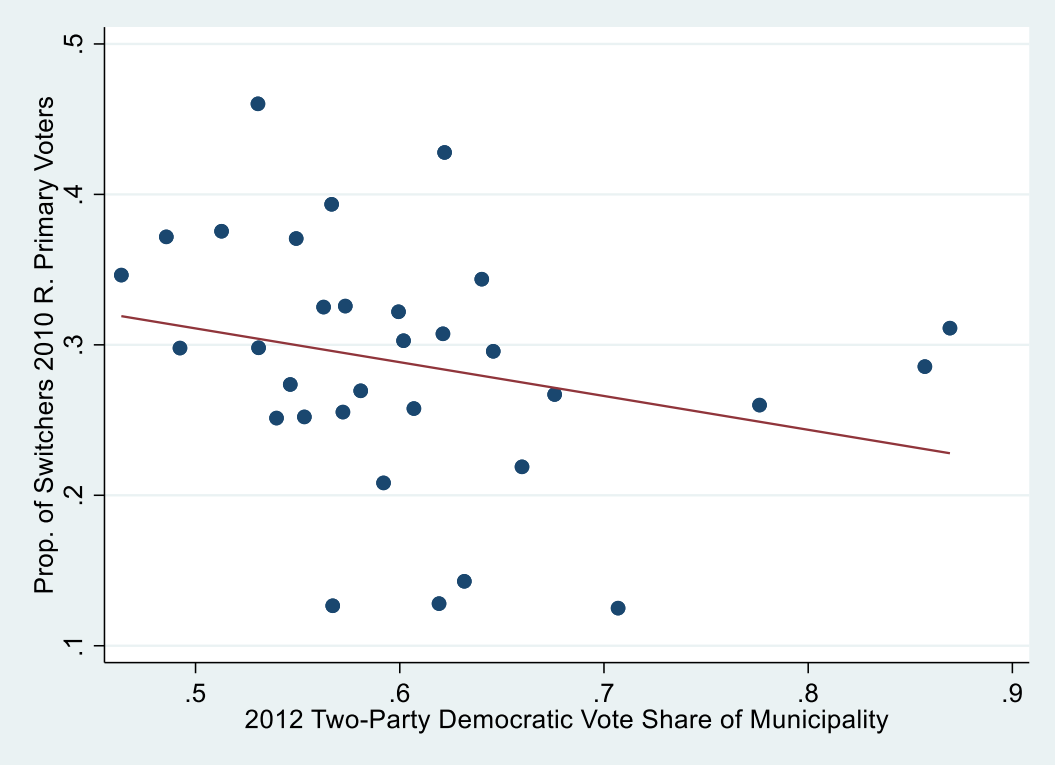


Figure 5: Proportion of Polling Place Switchers Among 2010 Republican Primary Voters in Rhode Island Municipalities, 2011 Rhode Island Voter File

The relationships appear in Figures 4 and 5. As expected, the relationship between polling place switching and city Democratic partisanship is significantly stronger among those voting in the 2010 Democratic primary compared to the 2010 Republican primary ($r$ = -0.67 vs. $r$ = -0.26). For both relationships, the correlation is negative; polling place switching is most common in Republican and competitive cities compared to strongly Democratic ones. However, among those voting in the 2010 Republican primary, the relationship is weaker. It is important to note that statewide more voters voting in the 2010 Republican primary were polling place switchers compared to those voting in the 2010 Democratic primary.

*Limitations and Future Directions*

While this paper identifies an unusual and theoretically interesting behavior, its analysis has several serious limitations. Most significant is the lack of information about voter party

identification in the voter file. While the majority of voters identify with their party of registration, there is evidence of a disconnect among some voters (Arrington and Grofman 1999; Key 1949; Thornburg 2018; 2019; 2023) and that this is especially true among individuals living in states with semi-closed primaries (Thornburg 2023).

I have no way to determine the party identification of individual polling place switchers and primary voters using the voter file and using 2010 party of primary almost certainly miscategorized some voters. A plausible alternative explanation for the greater number of 2010 Democratic primary polling place switchers in more Republican municipalities is that these individuals were actually Republican identifiers and leaners engaging in crossover voting into the Democratic primary. Future research should measure voter attitudes, behaviors, and party identification.

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