Riot in the Party:
Voter Registrations in the Aftermath of the January 6, 2021 Capitol Insurrection

Sara C. Loving* Daniel A. Smith†

Abstract

Key words: insurrection, party registration switching, policing

*Expected 2022 BA/BS, Department of Political Science & Department of Statistics, University of Florida (saraloving@ufl.edu).

†Professor of Political Science, University of Florida. 234 Anderson Hall, Gainesville, FL 32611 (dasmith@ufl.edu).

What happened in D.C. that day, it broke my heart. It shook me to the core.

– Juan Nunez, Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania[1]

I was completely shocked and ashamed. That's not how I think of the Republicans — who we were, and who we are.

– Lyle Darrah, Weld County, Colorado[2]

This is absolutely something they wanted to do to make a personal statement about which party they belonged to—and it wasn't the GOP.

– Michael McDonald, University of Florida[3]

In the days and weeks following the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol led by supporters of President Donald J. Trump and fomented by right-wing extremists, news outlets across the country reported that registered Republican voters were leaving the party in surprising numbers. Citing aggregate changes in party registration (in the states that record and make these data available), *The New York Times*, *National Public Radio*, and other news organizations ran stories with evocative headlines, such as, "'There's Nothing Left': Why Thousands of Republicans Are Leaving the Party." Over the three weeks following the riot on Capitol Hill, *the Times* reported, some 33,000 registered Republicans left the GOP in California, another 12,000 fled the party in Pennsylvania, and 10,000 more quit the party in Arizona. Overall, according to *The Times*, some 140,000 Republicans left the party in 25 states.[4]

Drawing on multiple years of millions of individual-level voter registration records in Florida, we turn a critical eye towards the presumed phenomenon of post-riot party switch-

[1] "'There's Nothing Left': Why Thousands of Republicans Are Leaving the Party," *New York Times*, February 10, 2021, available https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/10/us/politics/republicans-leaving-party.html (last accessed October 17, 2021).

[2] "Spurred By The Capitol Riot, Thousands Of Republicans Drop Out Of GOP," *National Public Radio*, February 1, 2021, available https://www.npr.org/2021/02/01/962246187/spurred-by-the-capitol-riot-thousands-of-republicans-drop-their-party (last accessed October 17, 2021).

[3] "Republicans Flee the GOP After Capitol Riots," *US News and World Report*, April 7, 2021, available https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2021-04-07/republicans-flee-the-gop-after-capitol-riots (last accessed October 17, 2021).

[4] See fn. 1.

ing in early 2021, specifically the apparent exodus from the Republican Party. Unlike other reports following the January 6, 2021 efforts to halt the conferring of Joe Biden as the winner of the 2020 presidential election, we place GOP switchers in a broader context. We investigate whether there were similar out-migrations of voters registered as Democrats, No Party Affiliates (NPAs), and minor (or "third" parties), to which parties these individuals switched their registration allegiances, and whether similar party switching happened in early 2017 years following the 2016 presidential election.

All of our analysis draws on individual-level records of official party registrations in Florida from January and February 2021. We compare the frequency and rates of party switchers across parties and over time. We are interested not only in who defected from the Republican Party (as well as the Democratic Party, minor parties, and those with no party affiliations), but more importantly, whether the party switching that occurred in the aftermath of the January 6, 2021 riot in the Capitol was anomalous, or typical, after a general election.

While our current study is unable to uncover the motives of party switchers,[5] we are able to place these party defectors in context—including their demographics, their past electoral turnout, and most importantly, their future party affiliations. In short, we are interested in not only who exited the Republican Party, but where did they go, were the patterns different than four years earlier, and was the party switching isolated to Republican Party adherents?

1 Party in the Streets: Who Participated in the January 6, 2021 Capitol Insurrection?

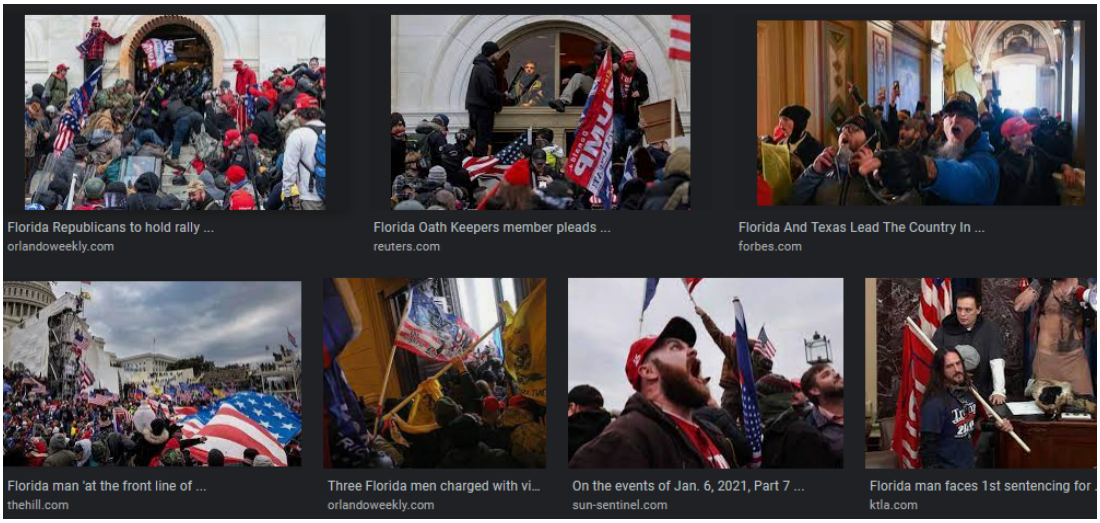
In the 2020 General Election, President Donald Trump, who easily won reelection in Florida by some 300,000 votes, lost both the nationwide popular vote by some 7 million

[5]In January 2022, we plan to field a survey of all vote-switchers (24,000 Republicans, 6,400 Democrats, 5,684 NPAs, and 1,000 3rd party registrants), asking them why they switched their party.

votes, and the Electoral College, 306 to 232, to Democratic challenger, Joe Biden. As an indicator of how deep the support for Trump was among some factions of mainstream Republicans in Florida, at least 10 county Republican Party websites, well after the November 3, 2020 election had been decided, still showed Donald Trump as either President or winner of the 2020 contest.[6] But the apex of Trump's Big Lie that the presidential election was stolen transpired on January 6, 2021. Spurred on by the "Stolen Election" rhetoric of the outgoing president at a rally in front of the White House, thousands of protesters, some decked out in military garb and carrying weapons, marched on the U.S. Capitol in an effort to halt the certification of the 2020 presidential election.

The participation of Floridians in the siege of the nation's seat of power is well documented. Figure 1 displays just a few of thousands of public images of Floridians participating in the melee. As of October 2021, roughly 10 percent of the nearly 700 individuals facing charges in the events called the Sunshine State their home, making Florida the most represented state at the riots.

Figure 1: Images of Floridians involved in the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol



Note: Google image search, "Florida January 6 rioters" (last accessed October 17, 2021.)

[6] "See the list of Florida GOP websites that still show Trump as president," *TCPalm*, March 19, 2021, available https://www.tcpalm.com/story/news/politics/2021/03/19/list-florida-gop-sites-trump-still-president/4754798001/ (last accessed October 17, 2021).

Of the 71 Floridians who have been charged with federal crimes as of late October 2021, we were able to identify 66 individuals registered in Florida's January 2021 statewide voter file.[7] Table 1 shows the distribution of the rioters' characteristics compared with the distribution of all registered voters in Florida. Nearly all of the rioters from Florida are white men registered with the Republican Party (86.4 percent white, 83.3 percent male, and 87.9 Republican, respectively). In all three areas—race/ethnicity, gender, and party—those charged with federal crimes far exceed the rates found in the statewide voter file, as the final column (% Difference) in Table 1 displays.

The January 6, 2021 rioters were also more likely to be middle-aged, with 30-44 being the most represented age group (45.5 percent), which far exceeds the statewide rate of registered voters in this age group. Older participants (ages 65 and up) who have been charged are greatly underrepresented relative to the statewide age distribution, and those aged 18-29 and 45-64 who have been charged have similar representation to their shares in the statewide voter file. Finally, these rioters were far more likely to turn out to vote compared to other members of the Florida electorate, with the largest difference occurring during the 2018 election (21.78 percent) in which Trump was not on the ballot. When conditioning to only include members of the Republican party, turnout numbers are similar.

[7] "Capitol riot arrests: See who's been charged across the U.S.," *USA Today*, October 14, 2021, available https://www.usatoday.com/storytelling/capitol-riot-mob-arrests/ (last accessed October 17, 2021).

Table 1: Demographics of Rioters versus All Registered Voters in Florida

Category	Descriptor	% Rioters	% All Registered Voters	% Difference
Party	Democrat	1.52	36.49	-34.97
	NPA	6.06	26.42	-20.36
	Minor	4.55	1.58	2.97
	Republican	**87.88**	35.51	**52.37**
Gender	Female	12.12	52.00	-39.88
	Male	**83.33**	45.08	**38.25**
	Unspecified	4.55	2.92	1.63
Race	Black	0.00	13.51	-13.51
	Hispanic	7.58	17.36	-9.78
	Minor	6.06	7.87	-1.81
	White	**86.36**	61.26	**25.10**
Age	18-23	6.06	7.85	-1.79
	24-29	9.09	9.30	-0.21
	30-44	**45.45**	22.72	**22.73**
	45-64	33.33	32.62	0.71
	65-105	6.06	27.41	-21.35
Turnout	2020 General	95.38	74.59	20.79
	2020 Primary	33.9	21.36	12.54
	2018 General	83.33	61.55	21.78
	2016 General	92.16	75.41	16.75

Note: Turnout when considering Republicans only was as follows for the rioters: 2020 General: 100%, 2020 Primary: 37.74%, 2018 General: 85.71%, and 2016 General: 95.56%. For all registered Republicans, turnout was as follows: 2020 General: 82%, 2020 Primary: 24.64%, 2018 General: 69.88%, and 2016 General: 82.4%.

Both the images and the partisan and demographic profiles of those charged in the January 6, 2021 insurrection underscore the core motivation of our paper: did registered Republicans in Florida, who were aware of the participants on that ignominious day, respond to the siege by defecting from the GOP? If so, did they switch to the Democratic Party, or did they join a minor party or become an NPA? Furthermore, was the jumping of ship by Republicans any more dramatic than the party switching of Democrats, NPAs, and minor party adherents? And, if they did jump ship, was the defection rate any more dynamic than what normally follows a presidential election, such as in early 2017 following Trump's defeat of Hillary Clinton – did voters upset with her loss defect from the Democratic Party? We turn to these questions after first discussing scholarship on the stickiness of party identification.

2 Party Attachment and Party Switching

With this brief description of the January 6 attacks and involvement of Florida registered voters as background, we turn to the primary motivating question of our research: did the aftermath of the insurrection in D.C. lead Republicans to leave the party? The conventional wisdom certainly suggests an exodus occurred. In the weeks following the events of January 6, several news outlets featured stories of registered Republican voters—offended by the actions of the rioters and of President Trump's insolence—leaving the GOP. *The New York Times* reported that in January alone, "nearly 140,000 Republicans had quit the party in 25 states that had readily available data"[8]

From one vantage point, that over 140,000 Republicans left the GOP in 25 states following the events on January 6, 2021 is staggering, even if it represents a small fraction of the overall number of registered Republicans in those states. But from a scholarly perspective, the mass exodus from a political party after an election does not comport with what we know about the adhesive relationship between individuals and political parties. Indeed, for over half a century, scholars have sought to understand why party allegiance is so sticky in the American context, rather than trying to understand why individuals might want to change their party registration. In the American context, partisan identification—which has been described as an "unmoved mover" (Johnston 2006)—remains quite stable at the individual level.

Riding the wave of the behavioral revolution in the social sciences more than half a century ago, the publication of *The American Voter* by Campbell et al. (1960) laid the foundation for much of the modern-day research on party identification. Using survey data to bolster the understanding of partisanship as an "individual's affective orientation toward an important group object in his environment," Campbell et al. (1960, p. 121) suggested that party identification originates in childhood and remains stable throughout an individual's life. In the rarest of cases, when a lapse occurs in the intuitive instinct of partisans to ignore information that does not reflect positively on their party, might

[8]See fn. 1.

one's partisanship teeter; that is, "only an event of extraordinary intensity can arouse any significant part of the electorate to the point that its established political loyalties are shaken" (Campbell et al. 1960, p. 151). Such cataclysmic "social forces," though, are rare—the authors point to just two, the Civil War and Great Depression.

To many contemporary observers of American politics, of course, the events of January 6, 2021, were of extraordinary intensity. To be sure, it is certainly possible—even in a highly polarized electorate (Abramowitz 2018; Bartels 2000) with polarized social identities that reinforce party-line voting (Mason 2018)—that the events of that day were shocking enough for some Republicans that they decided to bolt from the party. But theorizing about such dramatic events falls largely outside the covers of *The American Voter*.

Despite *The American Voter*'s well-earned place in the canon of political behavior, many scholars have criticized the book since its publication in 1960. Although theories on partisan attachment and models of voting, particularly the "funnel of causality" metaphor (Campbell et al. 1960, p. 24) are still used today, their measurement of party identification is often criticized as being overly simplistic. Green, Palmquist and Schickler (2002, pp. 5-6) write in *Partisan Hearts and Minds* that "those who return to *The American Voter* for guidance find its discussion of party identification terse and a bit vague," claiming that due to the book's widespread use in works on partisanship, theories of party identification have been underdeveloped and poorly supported by empirical research. Many find fault with Campbell et al.'s usage of only two elections from the 1950s, claiming that their results do not reflect the American population across time (Johnston 2006).

Others have challenged the assumptions of stable individual-level partisanship from a rational choice perspective. For example, in his book *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections*, Fiorina (1981) draws on two sets of panel studies to model simple and mediated retrospective evaluations. He finds that party identification plays a significant role in how one chooses to vote, and further, that individuals choose which party they identify with by conducting a "running tally of performance evaluations" of each party. In other words, party identification is a rational choice that registered voters make, which then influences their choice of which party to support. An earlier study conducted by Jennings and Niemi (1978) followed a panel of young adults, aged 17-18 when the study began in

1965, until 1973 when they were aged 25-26. They asked questions about each individual's party identification as well as surveying the participants' parents on their beliefs. They found that the correlation of party identification over the eight years was only .42, while the stability of the participants' parents' party identification throughout the same period was .67. They conclude that much of the development of party identification continues to evolve during early adulthood, contradicting the popular belief that party identification develops during childhood and stems from one's parents.

More recently, in *The Partisan Sort*, Levendusky (2009) examines how political elites have driven polarization since the 1970s. He argues that "elite polarization has caused voters to adopt the ideological outlook of their same-party elites" (Levendusky 2009, p.3), and that voters have been adapting their views to align with those of their party's leaders. This certainly might help to explain what we are seeing currently—members of the electorate following their leaders so diligently that some were willing to riot for the former President's benefit. Echoing Levendusky, in her book *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*, Mason (2018) argues that individual partisanship and its strength have led us to become more polarized. She claims that most voters "know, either through a lifetime of learning, from parental socialization, from news media, or through some combination thereof, that one party is better suited to them. This acts as a heuristic, a cognitive shortcut that allows voters to make choices that are informed by some helpful truth" (Mason 2018, p. 14). Critical of Green, Palmquist and Schickler (2002) for "miss[ing] out on a wealth of information provided by the social identity literature", Mason (2018, p. 16) advances a psychological aspect of partisan identity. Motivated by Tajfel et al. (1971)'s seminal study, which randomly grouped British schoolboys of similar characteristics to observe intergroup prejudice, (Mason 2018) argues that intergroup alliances—such as political parties—would rather maximize the difference between their groups and others even if it was not rational to do so.

In short, there is good reason to believe that party identification at the individual level is sticky. This might even more true today, as partisan sorting continued to solidify during Trump's term in office. "Trumpism" continues to make up a large faction of Republican Party supporters. Trump's notably hostile behavior—even to fellow Republicans—and

his influence on his supporters is well documented. Before the riots, Barber and Pope (2019) conducted a study using a survey from early 2017 that asked participants their opinions on political issues. They prompted these questions by specifying which political body supported the statement: Donald Trump, Congressional Republicans, or no affirmation of support (for the control group). Barber and Pope chose issues that Trump has gone back-and-forth on, or in other words, for which Trump has supported both liberal and conservative policy solutions. Using this method, they did not have to deceive their participants, but they could still figure out the effect of party allegiance on ideology and vice versa. Barber and Pope (2019, p. 4) found that "when told that President Trump supports a liberal policy, Republicans are substantially more likely to also endorse this policy compared to the same question with no mention of Trump's position...[l]ow-knowledge respondents, strong Republicans, those who approve of Trump, and even self-described ideological conservatives are the most likely to respond to the treatment condition in both a liberal and a conservative direction."

Yet, in contrast to the vast literature on individual party identification that suggests that partisanship is not often open to change, other scholars have challenged the fundamental premise of the strength of partisanship. Indeed, the authors of *The American Voter* themselves noted that while partisanship is "persistent" it can fluctuate, with roughly 20 percent of respondents reporting that "they have changed party affiliation during their lifetime (Campbell et al. 1960, p. 150). Later in his career, Converse (1976), in his book *The Dynamics of Party Support*, expanded upon his work with his Michigan School colleagues, arguing that "shocks to the electorate" are the cause of macro-partisan shifts. Using data from the 1960s, Converse found that the decline in identification with a political party happened concurrently with the Civil Rights Movement and protests against the Vietnam War. He points out that this was likely a response to the major political events occurring at the time. As Johnston (2006, p. 331) notes, concurring with Converse, "if a shock occurs in the period of maximum vulnerability," voters may change their partisan stripes.

While Converse and Johnston suggest that large-scale shifts in partisanship only occur after major political events, MacKuen, Erikson and Stimson (1989) lay out a different argument in their study on "macropartisanship." Finding that "partisan balance is not nearly

so stable as *The American Voter* or critical realignment theory would lead us to expect," MacKuen, Erikson and Stimson (1989, p. 1128) argue that there is evidence of shifting partisan attachments within the electorate. Evidence of this, of course, is the balance of a party's membership moving over time. The authors draw on Gallup historical data on presidential approval and Index of Consumer Sentiment scores of economic performance to model partisanship over time from 1953 until 1988. Their findings challenge the idea that partisanship is only altered after "shocks to the electorate" occur; rather, they argue that the balance of the parties shifts frequently and randomly. These "partisan movements of realignment magnitude (though not realignment duration)...require neither miracles nor catastrophes but instead arise from the routine success and failure of ordinary politics" (MacKuen, Erikson and Stimson 1989, p. 1139). They further highlight that most individuals do not vary their party affiliation systematically either—rather, a fraction of party changers act with a purpose, and the rest are changing randomly, leading to what they deem "aggregation gain." Thus, while macro-partisanship varies systematically, individual partisanship does not. Just as with theories of individual partisan stability, those discussing macro-partisanship are conflicted about when and how it may change, as well as with what magnitude and longevity.

Although there is not a scholarly consensus on whether partisanship shifts occur after major political events, or even the relationship between partisan (in)stability at the individual versus the macro level, there is a scholarly agreement concerning the relationship between party identification and party registration. Of the studies that have been conducted, the link between an individual's party identification and his or her party registration is the strongest in states that give voters the option to affiliate with a political party when registering to vote. Drawing on self-perception theory, Burden and Greene (2000) find that self-identified partisans are more likely to be found in states that require party registration, and Thornburg (2014), drawing on ANES panel data, finds that party self-identification is strongly related to party registration status. Indeed, as Finkel and Scarrow (1985) find, many individuals often conflate partisan identification with their party registration. Given these studies, we suggest that in Florida the link is likely to be especially strong. Not only is party registration captured in the statewide voter file

and a matter of public record, but party registration also is required if voters want to participate in primary elections. Party registration, as Thornburg (2014, p. 139) notes, "requires significant effort to alter," as the official registration "anchors" their partisanship. As such, the literature on the stability of partisan loyalties, which may be upended by cataclysmic events or belie macro-partisan changes, likely *underestimates* the stickiness of official party registration.

3 Data, Research Design, and Expectations

To gauge changes in party attachments in the aftermath of the storming of the Capitol, our study draws on official election administration data from Florida. Numerous studies have drawn on Florida's publicly available voter files (Herron and Smith 2014; Biggers and Hanmer 2015; Shino and Smith 2018; Baringer, Herron and Smith 2020) to look at individual-level changes. We use unique statewide voter ID numbers to link sequential monthly voter files provided by the Division of Elections from January 1 and February 1, 2021. Our analysis is conditioned on Florida's 15 million registered voters who were registered in Florida in both February and January 2021; that is, we screen out individuals who both joined or were removed from the statewide voter file in the month of January.[9] Florida's statewide voter file includes much demographic information—for example, an individual's race/ethnicity, gender, birth date, county, and vote history.

We draw on these statewide snapshots of the Florida voter file to isolate four aspects of party switching following the riot on the Hill. First, we are interested in the magnitude of party switching that happened prior to February 1, 2021—what fraction of Republicans,

[9]Unfortunately, publicly available Florida voter files do not specify the precise date a voter changed his or her party registration, or even the most recent date a voter's registration was updated. Given that January 6, 2021 fell on a Wednesday, and that all SOE offices in Florida were closed on January 1 (a federal holiday), the weekend of January 2 and 3; as such, the only party registration changes for the month of January 2021 that likely preceded the January 6 events are those processed on January 4 and January 5, 2021. We have no reason to believe that registrants with one party would have been more or less likely to change their party on these two days, and as such, do not think our findings are biased one way or another with regard to party switching.

Democrats, those registered with No Party Affiliation (NPAs), and minor party registrants switched parties, and were Republicans more likely than other registrants to switch parties. Second, we are interested in the direction of party switching, namely whether Republicans were more likely to join the Democratic Party than Democrats switching to the Republican Party in the weeks following the January 6, 2021 insurrection. In this vein, we are also interested if registrants of either major party switched to a minor party or became an NPA. Third, we are interested in whether Republicans (as well as Democrats, NPAs, and minor party registrants) were more likely to change parties in early 2021 compared to four years earlier after the 2016 presidential election, when the close election of Trump over Hillary Clinton was not followed by a failed attempt to overturn the election.

Our expectations are as follows. First, following contemporaneous accounts in the mainstream media, we expect both a higher number of Republicans and a higher rate of Republicans, leaving their party, compared to other registrants in early 2021. However, following the scholarly literature, even though the events of January 6, 2021 were shocking, we do not expect a wholesale departure of Republicans defecting from the party. We do expect, however, that a higher rate of Republicans left the GOP compared to Democrats leaving their party and that much fewer NPAs or minor party registrants changed their registrations. The apotheosis of Trump as the leader of the power has a powerful pull within the rank and file of the Republican Party, as "there is something about Trump or the presidency more generally that is much more powerful than a simple Republican label" (Barber and Pope 2019, p. 9).

Second, with regard to the direction of party switching, the mainstream media suggests that many Republicans, disillusioned with the actions of demonstrators on January 6, 2021, switched to the Democratic Party. This notion conforms with the scholarship that understands party identification as a kind of running tally (Fiorina 1981); in this case, the Republican Party establishment (embodied by Trump's exhortations in front of the White House on that day), altering their internal "performance evaluations." If this theory is correct, then it is certainly plausible that some Republicans viewed the contemporaneous events with such contempt that they decided to vote with their feet and join the other team. We are agnostic with regard to possible party switching of Democrats, NPAs, or

minor party registrants. Third, with respect to party defections compared to four years ago, we think that the events of January 6, 2021 likely had a greater effect on Republicans than Democrats to rethink their identification with their party. As such, we expect to see the rate of defection from the GOP to the Democratic Party being greater in 2021 than in 2017, when there was not an extraordinary shock to the party system. That said, we would not be surprised to find other party allegiance shifts following the contentious 2020 General Election given the tumultuous events in early January 2021.

4 Findings

To understand if there was indeed a riot in the (Republican) party, we begin with some simple crosstabs of voters in 2021 who changed their political party registration between January 1, 2021 and February 1, 2021. Table 2 reveals that 24,272 Republicans, 6,442 Democrats, 5,684 NPAs, and 890 minor party registrants switched their registration in January 2021. As a fraction of the overall number of Republican, Democratic, NPA, and minor party registrants, these are notably small numbers; after all, over 11 million of the state's 15.2 million registered voters cast ballots in the 2020 General Election. In total, the 37,288 party switchers comprise less than a quarter of a percent of all registered voters in Florida.

Still, we find that Republicans were nearly four times more likely to switch parties than Democrats (0.45 percent compared to 0.12 percent), about three times more likely than NPAs (0.14 percent), and slightly more likely to switch than members of minor parties (0.37 percent). Registrants with the two major parties comprise over two-thirds of the state's registered voters (the state is a closed primary state, so in order to vote in primary elections, voters have an incentive to join a party), thus making them a much greater presence in the voter file than NPA and minor parties. In raw numbers, but also as a percentage of their overall registration figure in January 2021, Table 2 shows that Republicans were the most likely to switch from their party and Democrats were the least likely.

We turn now to which party these switchers changed. Of the more than 24,000 Re-

publicans who switched their party, as Table 2 reveals, only 4,231 became Democrats, or 17.4 percent of GOP switchers. In contrast, 59.4 percent of these changers switched to NPA, and 23.1 percent switched to a minor party. This is to be expected; if Republicans are leaving the party due to the insurrection, it would be more logical for them to become a non-affiliated registered voter (NPA), or to switch to a minor party with similar policy views, such as Libertarian or Constitution party, as opposed to jumping to the opposing team.

Table 2: Party Changers in Florida, January 2021 to February 2021

January 2021	February 2021	n	%
Democrat	Democrat	5,489,485	99.88
	NPA	3,758	0.07
	Minor	784	0.01
	Republican	1,900	0.03
	Total Switchers	6,442	0.12
NPA	Democrat	2,314	0.06
	NPA	3,975,592	99.86
	Minor	1,055	0.03
	Republican	2,315	0.06
	Total Switchers	5,684	0.14
Minor	Democrat	151	0.06
	NPA	603	0.25
	Minor	237,322	99.63
	Republican	136	0.06
	Total Switchers	890	0.37
Republican	Democrat	4,231	0.08
	NPA	14,436	0.27
	Minor	5,605	0.10
	Republican	5,322,621	99.55
	Total Switchers	24,272	0.45

As noted earlier, fewer Democrats switched their party registration compared to Republicans: 6,442 Democrats left the party in January 2021. Of these switchers, 29.5 percent changed to Republican, 58.3 percent changed to NPA; the balance, 12.1 percent, joined

a minor party. It is interesting to note that of the individuals who switched their party affiliations, Republicans were nearly twice as likely to switch to a minor party compared to Democrats. Furthermore, and an important confound to the mainstream media's focus on Republican switchers, we find that 1,900 of the 6,442 registered Democrats (29.5 percent) switched to the GOP after the January 6, 2021 uprising, a higher percentage than the percentage of Republicans—17.4 percent, or 4,231 out of 24,272) who switched from the GOP to the Democratic Party. We have found no contemporaneous mainstream accounts suggesting that the paramilitary assault on the U.S. Capitol drew Democrats to the party of Trump.

Another interesting reading of the data is that of the 4,629 NPAs who switched their registrations to one of the two major parties in January, the distribution to the Democratic and Republican parties was nearly equal (2,314 versus 2,315, or 40.7 percent each of all NPAs who switched). Another 1,000 or so NPAs renounced their unaffiliated status and joined a minor party by February 1, 2021. Finally, we find that a very small number of minor party members switched their affiliations; the majority of those who did so became NPAs (67.8 percent), with slightly more who joined a major party becoming Democrats (17.0 percent) than Republicans (15.3 percent).

It is important to evaluate party switchers from a comparative perspective. Perhaps this is a pattern we see after every presidential election, and political observers are ascribing such party switching to the events of January 6, 2021. We turn now to the same time frame (January 1 to February 1) in 2017, the months that followed the last presidential election. Table 3 shows that in 2017, Republicans were the *least* likely group to switch parties, with only 0.05 percent leaving the party in the first month of the year. Democrats were slightly more likely to switch parties at 0.08 percent, and NPAs more likely than both at 0.11 percent. At first glance, that only 0.05 percent of Republicans left the party in the first month of 2017—9 times less than the 0.45 percent that left in 2021—is jarring. In comparison, the difference for Democrats leaving the party in 2017 (0.08 percent) compared to 2021 (0.12 percent) is quite minimal.

But we also need to consider to which party these switchers changed. Among the 2,451 Republicans who switched their party, 878 become Democrats, or 35.8 percent of GOP

switchers; 56.6 percent switched to NPA (1,387), and 7.6 percent switched to a minor party (186). As in 2021, about the same number of NPA registrants switched to the Democratic and Republican parties (1,675 versus 1,631).

Our findings from the party switching that came on the heels of the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections suggest that Republicans who left the party in 2021 were likely driven to some degree with displeasure or disgust resulting from the insurrection. It is certainly true that the party that nominated the losing presidential candidate in the general election had a higher defection rate the following January, but Republicans fled the party at a much higher clip in 2021 than Democrats did in 2017. This seems to indicate that party switching among party faithful may be an artifact of leaving the party that lost the presidency, but that in 2021, this exodus was exacerbated by the riot at the U.S. Capitol.

Before concluding, it is important to flag a clear anomaly that stands out in Table 3, that is, that individuals registered with minor parties apparently left third parties in droves. This outlier is easily explained, however, and does not detract from our analysis. The "Minor" party category summarized in the table includes all registrants with minor parties (e.g., Libertarian Party, Reform Party, Green Party, etc.) appears to have had experienced a massive shift to NPAs in January 2017. But really this is a function of an administrative rule implemented by the Division of Elections in January 2017, following its determination that the "Independent Party"—which had over 250,000 registered voters in 2016—should be dissolved and no longer recognized as an official party.[10] In January 2017, the party registration of all individuals registered with the Independent Party was automatically changed to NPA.[11]

[10]See Florida Division of Elections, "2016 Presidential Preference Primary, Active Registered Voters by Party," February 2016, 2016, available http://dos.myflorida.com/media/696035/ppp2016_countyparty.pdf (last accessed October 25, 2021).

[11]See "State wipes out Independent Party of Florida," *Orlando Sentinel*, available https://www.orlandosentinel.com/politics/os-independent-party-stripped-status-20170214-story.html, February 14, 2017 (last accessed October 26, 2021).

Table 3: Party Changers in Florida, January 2017 to February 2017

January 2017	February 2017	n	%
Democrat	Democrat	5,171,953	99.92
	NPA	1,949	0.04
	Minor	256	0.00
	Republican	1,882	0.04
	Total Switchers	4,087	0.08
NPA	Democrat	1,675	0.05
	NPA	3,353,160	99.89
	Minor	292	0.01
	Republican	1,631	0.05
	Total Switchers	3,598	0.11
Minor	Democrat	174	0.05
	NPA	84,775	22.84
	Minor	286,039	77.07
	Republican	167	0.04
	Total Switchers	85,116	22.93
Republican	Democrat	878	0.02
	NPA	1,387	0.03
	Minor	186	0.00
	Republican	4,765,958	99.95
	Total Switchers	2,451	0.05

5 Discussion

Our analysis of these snapshots of the Florida voter file leads us to several conclusions. To begin, it seems as though a much higher rate of Republicans left the party compared to registrants of other parties in January 2021. Though a rate of 0.45 percent is by no means a mass exodus of Floridians from the GOP, it is significant in light of the fact that only 0.05 of registered Republicans left the party during the same month in 2017, the last post-presidential election year. While the defection rate from the GOP in January 2021 was seven times greater than the same period four years earlier, the raw figures hardly constitute a "fall of the Republican party," as some news outlets reported in early 2021. As scholars have shown, partisan identification is largely stable; the updating of one's voter registration is a fairly sophisticated behavior and one that represents a conscious effort to de-identify with a party, certainly when compared to reporting one's party identification.

Our expectation that fewer NPA and minor party registrants would have changed their affiliations than Democrats or Republicans was not borne out. Democrats were the least likely group to change their party registration in early 2021, while members of minor parties were nearly as likely as Republicans to change their party following the January insurrection. Furthermore, Republicans who left the party were much more likely to switch to NPA or to a minor party than they were to change to the Democratic party, in contrast to salacious media reports about the implosion of the GOP. Finally, though, through an examination of the January 1 to February 1, 2017 statewide Florida voter files, we find that the increased rate of GOP defection in 2021 was not simply the result of the party's presidential candidate suffering a loss. Following the 2016 presidential election, Democrats left the party at a lower rate (0.08 percent) in early 2017 than they did in 2021 (0.12 percent), making any "winner-take-all" effects seem unlikely.

Overall, although we cannot determine the motives of post-insurrection party-switchers, it seems likely that the January 6, 2021 events caused some Republicans to flee the party at a higher rate than they would have had Trump simply lost the election and walked into the sunset. This finding is supported by recent papers which employ other measures of partisanship, such as the study by (Eady, Hjorth and Dinesen 2021) that analyzes data

from 3.4 million Twitter bios. Using a difference-in-differences model for data collected within a 10-day window around the January 6, 2021 events, Eady, Hjorth and Dinesen (2021, p. 11) find significant results that suggest "the insurrection caused a substantial number of Republican partisans to actively remove expressions of identification with the Republican Party and Donald Trump." Examining data through March 2021, they found that this effect persisted—only a small percentage of de-identifiers added identification labels back into their bios. However, they do not attempt to differentiate between support for Trump and support for the Republican Party, as "[p]artisan terms indicating identification with Trumpism...are more frequent than those referencing the Republican Party itself, which raises the question of whether the effect is wholly driven by de-identification with the President rather than the party" (Eady, Hjorth and Dinesen 2021, p. 8).

In conclusion, while our results support the theory that the GOP lost membership in Florida at a higher rate following the Capitol riots than in previous post-election years, as well as compared to registrants with the Democratic Party, NPAs, and minor parties, there is still much research to be conducted about Trumpism and its effect on Republican Party faithful and the broader electorate.

References

Abramowitz, Alan I. 2018. *The Great Alignment: Race, Party Transformation, and the Rise of Donald Trump*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Barber, Matthew and Jeremy Pope. 2019. "Does Party Trump Ideology? Disentangling Party and Ideology in America." *American Political Science* 113(1):38–54.

Baringer, Anna, Michael C. Herron and Daniel A. Smith. 2020. "Voting by Mail and Ballot Rejection: Lessons from Florida for Elections in the Age of the Coronavirus." *Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy* 19(3):289–320.

Bartels, Larry M. 2000. "Partisanship and Voting Behavior, 1952-1996." *American Journal of Political Science* 44(1):35–50.

Biggers, Daniel R. and Michael J. Hanmer. 2015. "Who makes voting convenient? Explaining the adoption of early and no-excuse absentee voting in the American states." *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 15(2):192–210.

Burden, Barry C. and Steven Greene. 2000. "Party Attachments and State Election Laws." *Political Research Quarterly* 53(1):63–76.

URL: *https://doi.org/10.1177/106591290005300103*

Campbell, Angus, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller and Donald E. Stokes. 1960. *The American Voter*. United Kingdom: University of Chicago Press.

Converse, Philip.E. 1976. *The Dynamics of Party Support: Cohort-Analyzing Party Identification*. Sage Publications.

Eady, Gregory, Frederik Hjorth and Peter Thisted Dinesen. 2021. "Do Violent Protests Affect Expressions of Party Identity? Evidence from the Capitol Insurrection.". Retrieved from osf.io/dvgj3 (October 26, 2021).

Finkel, Steven E and Howard A Scarrow. 1985. "Party identification and party enrollment: The difference and the consequences." *The Journal of Politics* 47(2):620–642.

Fiorina, Morris.P. 1981. *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections*. Yale University Press.

Green, Donald P., Bradley Palmquist and Eric Schickler. 2002. *Partisan Hearts and Minds: Political Parties and the Social Identities of Voters*. United Kingdom: Yale University

Press.

Herron, Michael C and Daniel A Smith. 2014. "Race, party, and the consequences of restricting early voting in Florida in the 2012 general election." *Political Research Quarterly* 67(3):646–665.

Jennings, M. Kent and Richard G. Niemi. 1978. "The Persistence of Political Orientations: An Over-Time Analysis of Two Generations." *British Journal of Political Science* 8(3):333–363.

Johnston, Richard. 2006. "Party Identification: Unmoved Mover or Sum of Preferences?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 9(1):329–351.

Levendusky, Matthew. 2009. *The Partisan Sort: How Liberals Became Democrats and Conservatives Became Republicans.* Ukraine: University of Chicago Press.

MacKuen, Michael B., Robert S. Erikson and James A. Stimson. 1989. "Macropartisanship." *The American Political Science Review* 83(4):1125–1142.

Mason, Lilliana. 2018. *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became our Identity.* University of Chicago Press.

Shino, Enrijeta and Daniel A. Smith. 2018. "Timing the Habit: Voter Registration and Turnout." *Electoral Studies* 51:72–82.

Tajfel, Henri, M.G. Billig, R.P. Bundy and Claude Flament. 1971. "Social Categorization and Intergroup Behaviour." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 1(2):149–178.

Thornburg, Matthew P. 2014. "Party registration and party self-identification: Exploring the role of electoral institutions in attitudes and behaviors." *Electoral Studies* 36:137–148.

URL: *https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0261379414000912*