

Do Voters Change Their Policy Preferences When They Change Parties? Evidence from Canadian Panel Data

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Abstract

In recent years, considerable evidence has emerged that citizens adjust their policy preferences to reflect their party preferences. The implication of this party following perspective is that, when citizens change their vote choice, they should then adopt the policy positions of their new party. Between 2000 and 2011 in Canada, the centrist Liberal Party, which previously dominated Canadian politics lost considerable support to the right-of centre Conservative Party and to the centre-left New Democratic Party (NDP). If vote switchers follow their new party, former Liberal voters who switched to the Conservatives should have shifted their policy preferences to the right, while those who switched to the NDP should have moved their preferences to the left. I use panel data from the Canadian Election Study to test these expectations. I find strong evidence that voters who switched to the Conservative Party moved their policy preferences to the right. These findings have major implications for the study of electoral competition and policy representation.

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Ever since *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960), scholars of voting behaviour have argued that parties influence citizens' attitudes towards parties. In recent years, a large number of experimental studies have shown that partisans adapt their attitudes to cues from parties (e.g. Cohen 2003; Merolla, Stephenson, and Zechmeister 2008). Scholars in recent years have attributed this tendency to partisan motivated reasoning, whereby partisans adopt attitudes that support their party (Leeper and Slothuus 2014). However, it is now clear that party influence extends beyond partisanship (Guntermann 2020). In particular, as shown by Lenz (2012) using panel data, citizens rationalize their vote choice by adopting the positions of the party and/or candidate they vote for.

The implication of the tendency of citizens to adopt the positions of the party they vote for is that policy preferences may reflect the changing electoral fortunes of parties. When a party with given positions performs well electorally, it may lead voters who switch their votes to it to adjust their policy preferences in its direction. While Lenz (2012) and others (notably, Tesler 2015) have shown that parties influence the policy preferences of their current voters, to my knowledge, there is no published study that shows that parties influence the preferences of voters who change their vote choice.

I take advantage of the context of electoral change that occurred between 2004 and 2011 at the federal level in Canada. The Liberal Party of Canada (LPC) has dominated politics for much of Canadian history. However, partly as a result of the sponsorship scandal, it lost its majority in the 2004 election, then lost the election to the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) in 2006. The Liberals continued to lose votes and seats in 2008 and 2011. In each of these four elections, the Conservatives gained at the Liberals expense The New Democratic Party (NDP) also gained votes and seats in each of these elections. As we will see, many of the votes gained by the CPC and the NDP came from former Liberal voters. I take advantage of this electoral change to determine whether switchers from the Liberals, on the one hand, to the Conservatives and NDP, on the other hand, shifted their policy preferences to the right and left, respectively.

Fortunately, the Canadian Election Study (CES) carried out a panel study during this period of electoral change. Respondents were interviewed in the 2004, 2006, 2008, and 2011 elections. This dataset allows me to follow changes in voting behaviour and in voters' policy preferences.

Why Vote Switchers Should Change Their Policy Preferences

The study of the relationship between policy preferences and vote choice has long been dominated by two contrasting perspectives. In the perspective begun by Downs (1957), voters select the party whose positions are closest to theirs (Davis, Hinich, and Ordeshook 1970). However, according to the Michigan school, voters have long-standing attachments to parties which lead them to vote for the same party election after election. Voters' party attachments also influence their policy preferences (Campbell et al. 1960). In recent decades, numerous experimental studies have supported the contention that party identification influences policy preferences (e.g. Cohen 2003; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013; Merolla, Stephenson, and Zechmeister 2008). More recently, however, Lenz (2012) assessed the relationship between voters' policy preferences, on the one hand, and their candidate and party preferences, on the other hand, and found that, voters rationalize their vote choice by adopting their preferred party

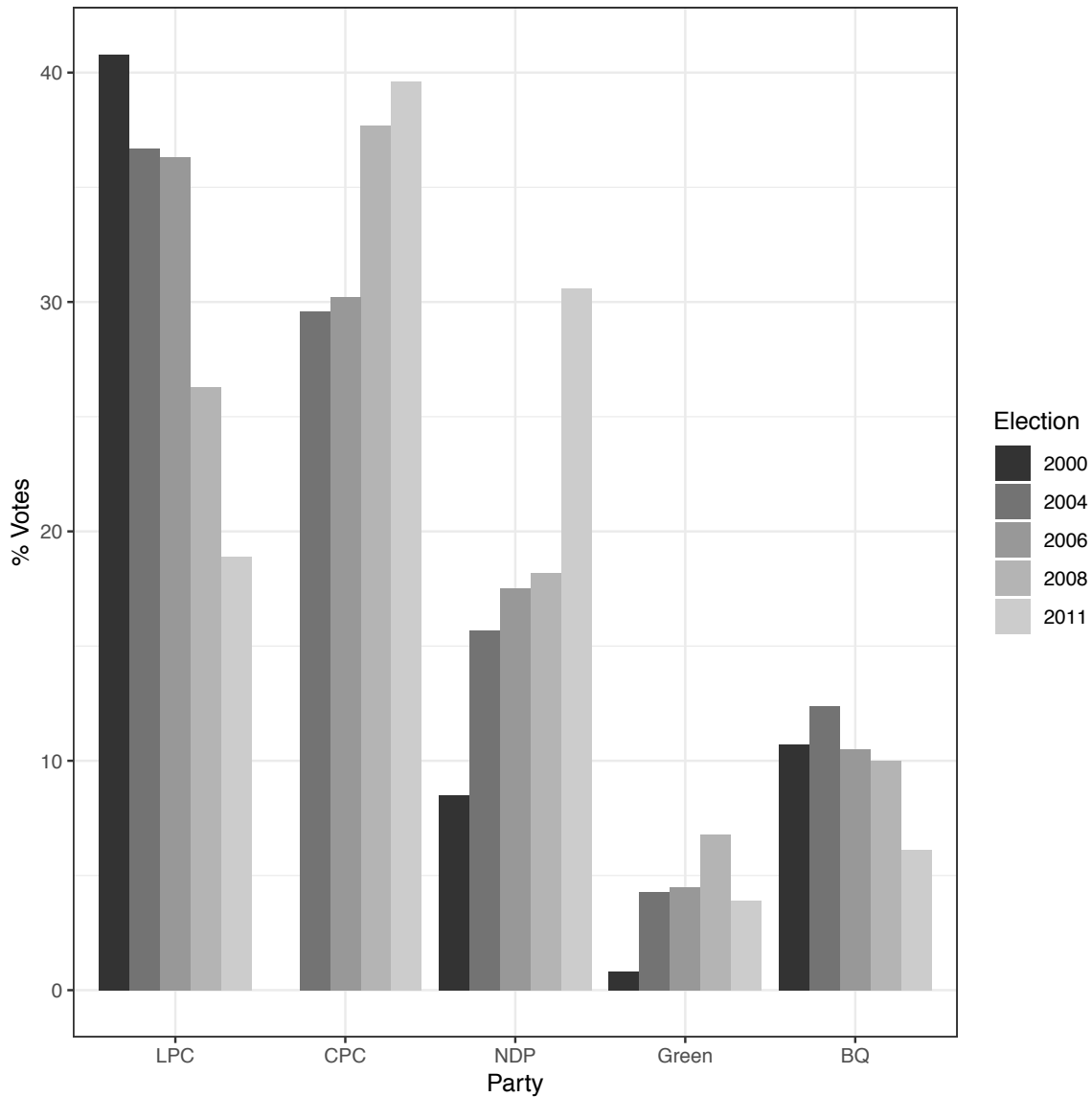
or candidate's policy preferences. Earlier studies also found evidence that citizens adjust their policy preferences to reflect their vote choice (Brody and Page 1972; Markus and Converse 1979; Page and Jones 1979).

The implication of this rationalization or persuasion perspective is that voters who change parties should move their policy preferences in the direction of their new party. However, to my knowledge, this expectation has still not been tested.

Background on Canadian Federal Elections from 2004 to 2011

This period is particularly interesting given the important changes in party standings that took place. The Liberals went from a position of dominance following three consecutive majority governments to eventually losing power to the Conservatives (Gidengil et al. 2012). Figure 1 shows the vote shares of the major parties in the five elections that took place during this period. We can see that the Liberals lost support in every election. At the same time, the Conservatives and the NDP made gains in every election. The Green Party made considerable progress up to 2008 then declined. Meanwhile, the Bloc Québécois declined following the 2004 election. Policy preferences only offer a partial explanation for the changes in vote shares that took place during this period (Gidengil et al. 2012). A much more significant factor in the 2004 and 2006 elections was the sponsorship scandal (Gidengil et al. 2012). Thus, changes in vote choice that occurred for non-policy reasons may have led to later changes in policy preferences.

Figure 1: Vote Share by Party in Each Election



Source: Elections Canada. Official Voting Results

Research Design

I leverage the panel study conducted by the Canadian Election Study (CES) which encompassed the 2004, 2006, 2008, and 2011 elections. The CES ran a campaign period (pre-election) and post-election survey for each election. They also ran a subsequent mail-back study in all years except 2006.

I focus on changes in vote choice from the Liberals to the Conservatives, on the one hand, and the NDP, on the other hand. I consider vote shifts that can be assessed using the panel dataset and which can be linked to subsequent changes in policy preferences. I, therefore, focus on shifts from a Liberal vote intention in the 2004 campaign period study to a CPC or NDP vote in the post-election study. I also consider shifts from a 2004 Liberal vote to a 2006 CPC or NDP vote

and shifts from a 2006 Liberal vote to a 2008 CPC or NDP vote.¹ Unfortunately, the panel does not go back to 2000, which means that I miss voters who switched prior to the 2004 campaign. It also does not extend beyond 2011, thus preventing me from assessing changes in policy preferences that occurred after that year.

I select all respondents who at the beginning of these periods of change intended to vote Liberal. I then create dummy variables indicating they later voted Conservative, on the one hand, or NDP, on the other. I then assess changes in policy preferences on all nine issues that were measured in each of the post-election studies. I compare policy preferences in the study following the change in vote choice to those in the subsequent election study, allowing me to ensure that all changes in policy attitudes follow changes in vote choice. I also assess changes in respondents' self-placements on the left-right ideological scale, although such self-placements were only asked in the mail-back survey, with a smaller response rate and they were not asked in 2006. Thus, I use 2004 self-placements as a baseline for vote shifts that occur in 2004 and for vote shifts between 2006 and 2008, making the ideological self-placement analyses somewhat less clear about the temporal ordering of changes. I also created a scale of the policy preference items by rescaling each of them so higher values indicate more conservative preferences and by taking their sum. Table 1 shows the changes in vote choice as well as the corresponding changes in policy preferences I consider.

Table 1: Changes in Vote Choice and Changes in Policy Preferences

Initial Vote	Changed Vote/Initial Policy Preference	Changed Policy Preferences
2004 Pre-Election Study	2004 Post-Election Study	2006 Post-Election Study
2004 Post-Election Study	2006 Post-Election Study	2008 Post-Election Study
2006 Post-Election Study	2008 Post-Election Study	2011 Post-Election Study

Across the three periods of change, there were 83 respondents who initially voted (or intended to vote) Liberal who later switched to the NDP (15 in 2004, 45 in 2006, and 27 in 2008) and 143 who initially supported the Liberals then shifted to the Conservatives (27 shifted in 2004, 71 in 2006, and 45 in 2008). I pooled the data from the three periods of change to increase the statistical power.

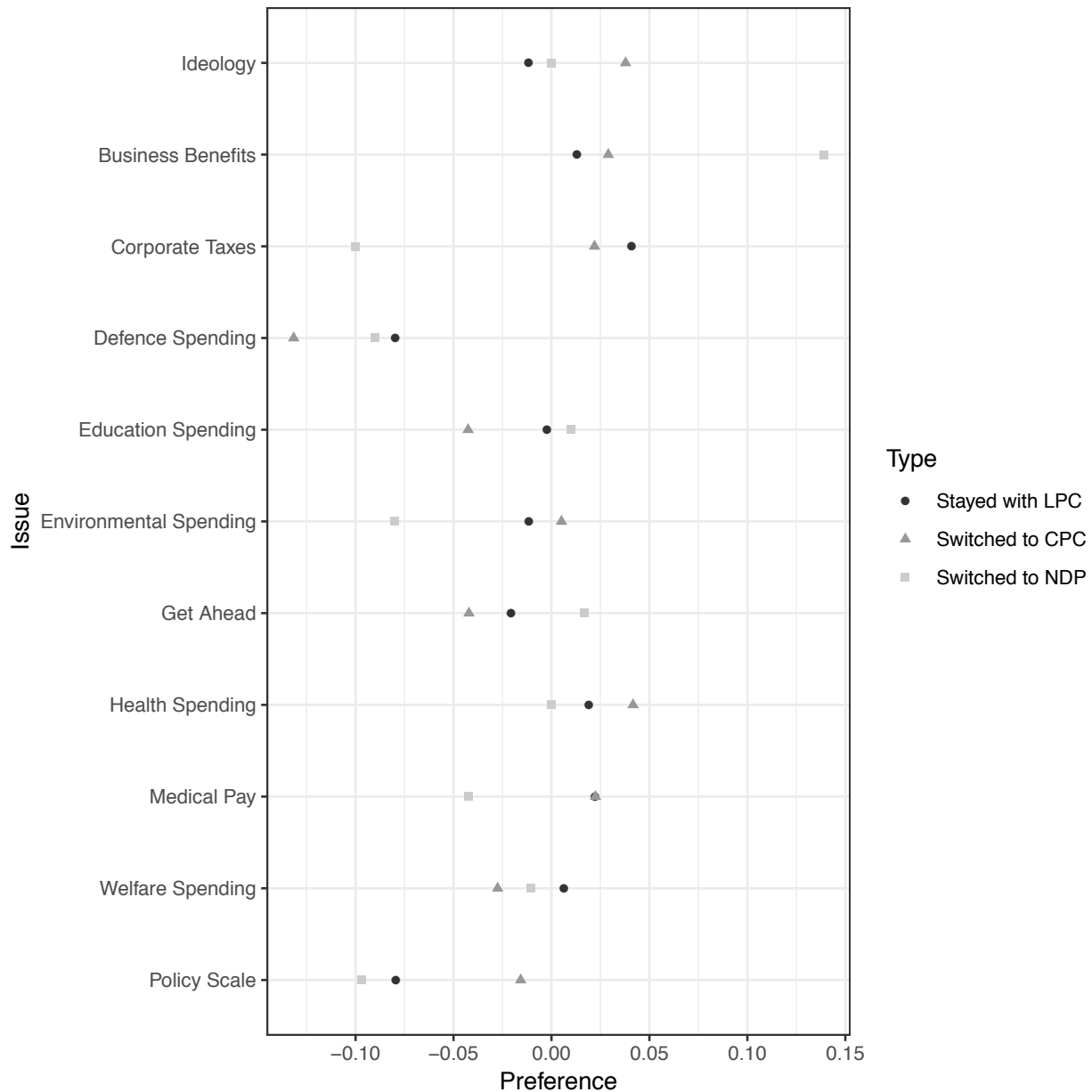
Results

Figure 2 shows changes in ideological self-placements, preferences on each issue as well as positions on the nine-item policy scale broken down by whether respondents stayed with the Liberals, switched to the Conservatives or moved to the NDP. We can see that those who moved to the Conservatives moved 0.04 points to the right on the 0 to 1 left-right self-placement scale (i.e. 0.4 on the original 0 to 10 scale). Those who switched to the NDP did not shift their preferences though. Liberal stayers did shift very moderately to the left (0.01 points). The various categories of voters moved in inconsistent directions on different issues. A noticeable pattern though is that everyone seems to have moved to the left on most issues. The biggest changes were that NDP partisans, unexpectedly, became more likely to believe that everyone

¹ Vote choice is from the Post-election study.

benefits when businesses benefit and that they became more supportive of increasing corporate taxes. When we look at the overall scale though, we can see that both NDP switchers and Liberal stayers shifted to the left, while those who changed to the Conservatives largely resisted the leftward trend.

Figure 2: Changes in Policy Preferences by Issue and Type of Voter



To test the extent to which switchers adjust their policy preferences, I regress each of the summary measures of policy preferences (ideological self-placement) and positions on the policy scale measured after the election that follows the change in vote choice on the dummies indicating a switch to the NDP and the CPC, respectively, as well as the policy measure from the election during which the respondent changes their vote as well as dummy variables for each election. Table 2 shows the results. The coefficients of interest are on the “Switched to NDP” and “Switched to CPC” dummies, showing how much more these categories of votes moved in a given direction than voters who stayed with the Liberal Party. In Model 1, the dependent variable is changes in self-placements along the left-right scale. Recall that it was rescaled from 0 to 1. Therefore, coefficients show how many percentage points of the ideological scale respondents

who made each shift moved to the right or left compared to those who stayed with the Liberals. While the coefficient on “Switched to NDP” is weakly negative, it is not significant. That on “Switched to CPC” is positive and significant. Former Liberal partisans who changed to the CPC later shifted 7 percent to the right along the left-right scale.

In Model 2, the dependent variable is changes in the nine-item policy scale. The dependent variable was kept on the 0 to 9 scale so coefficients tell us on how many items respondents shift to the right. Once again, the changes among those who moved to the NDP are weakly negative but not significant. Changes among those who shifted to the Conservatives are much more substantial and the coefficient is significant. The coefficient on “Switched to CPC” indicates that a respondent who moved from the Liberals to the Conservatives became almost a quarter of an item more conservative on the policy scale. Thus, former Liberal voters who switched to the Conservatives became more conservative whether assessed using either ideological self-placement or the policy scale. I did not find evidence that those who shifted to the NDP changed their preferences, although that may be because the number of respondents who shifted to the NDP is too small in the sample.

Table 2: Models of Changes in Policy Preferences

	Model 1 DV: Ideological Self-Placement	Model 2 DV: Policy Scale
Intercept	0.23*	1.43
	(0.03)	(0.11)
Switched to NDP	-0.02	-0.06
	(0.03)	(0.16)
Switched to CPC	0.07*	0.22*
	(0.02)	(0.11)
Lagged DV	0.51*	0.61*
	(0.04)	(0.03)
2006 Election	-0.01	-0.33*
	(0.02)	(0.08)
2008 Election	-0.02	-0.54*
	(0.02)	(0.10)
Adjusted R ²	0.31	0.43
N	342	593
Standard errors in parentheses		
*indicates significance at 0.05 level or below		

Note: the dependent variables are measured after the election following the one in which the respondent changed their vote. The lagged DV is from the election in which the change in vote choice takes place.

Are these changes in policy preferences by Conservatives large? To put them in perspective, I now compare the policy preferences of each type of voter at the time of the election in which they shifted their vote choice. Figure 2 shows the policy positions of each type of voter. We can see that those who switched to the NDP were clearly to the left and those who switched to the Conservatives were clearly to the right of Liberal stayers on the ideological scale and the overall policy scale as well as on most of the items. The exceptions are the spending items on which Liberal stayers and those who switched to the NDP have very similar positions. On the health spending item, all three types of voters have similar preferences. Overall, what is clear from Figure 2 is that the three groups of voters were distinct on nearly all the issues, whereas the different types of voters did not experience clearly distinct changes in policy preferences in Figure 1.

To compare changes in policy preferences to initial differences in preferences, I then regress initial ideological self-placements and the policy scale on the dummies indicating respondents switched to the NDP and to the Conservatives as well as fixed effects for elections. We can see that former Liberal voters who switched to the NDP were 0.07 points to the left of Liberal stayers, which is a significant difference. Those who changed to the Conservatives, however, did not have positions that were significantly different from those of Liberal stayers. Meanwhile, NDP switchers were a quarter of an item to the left of stayers on the policy scale, but this difference was not significant. Those who changed to the CPC, however, were over a half point to the right on the policy scale of those who stayed with the Liberals and that difference was significant. Thus, while NDP switchers had clearly distinct ideological self-placements but not preferences on individual policy items, CPC switchers were clearly to the right on policy items but not on the ideological scale.

To put the changes in policy preferences in perspective, the difference between changes in ideological self-placements by Conservative switchers and Liberal stayers was 3.5 times greater than initial differences between the two groups' self-placements. The difference between changes in the policy scale among Conservative switchers and Liberal stayers was two-fifths as big as the initial gap between these two groups of voters. Thus, the adjustments vote switchers made in their policy preferences are considerable when compared to how distinct the groups' preferences were prior to the changes.

Figure 2: Initial Policy Preferences by Issue and Type of Voter

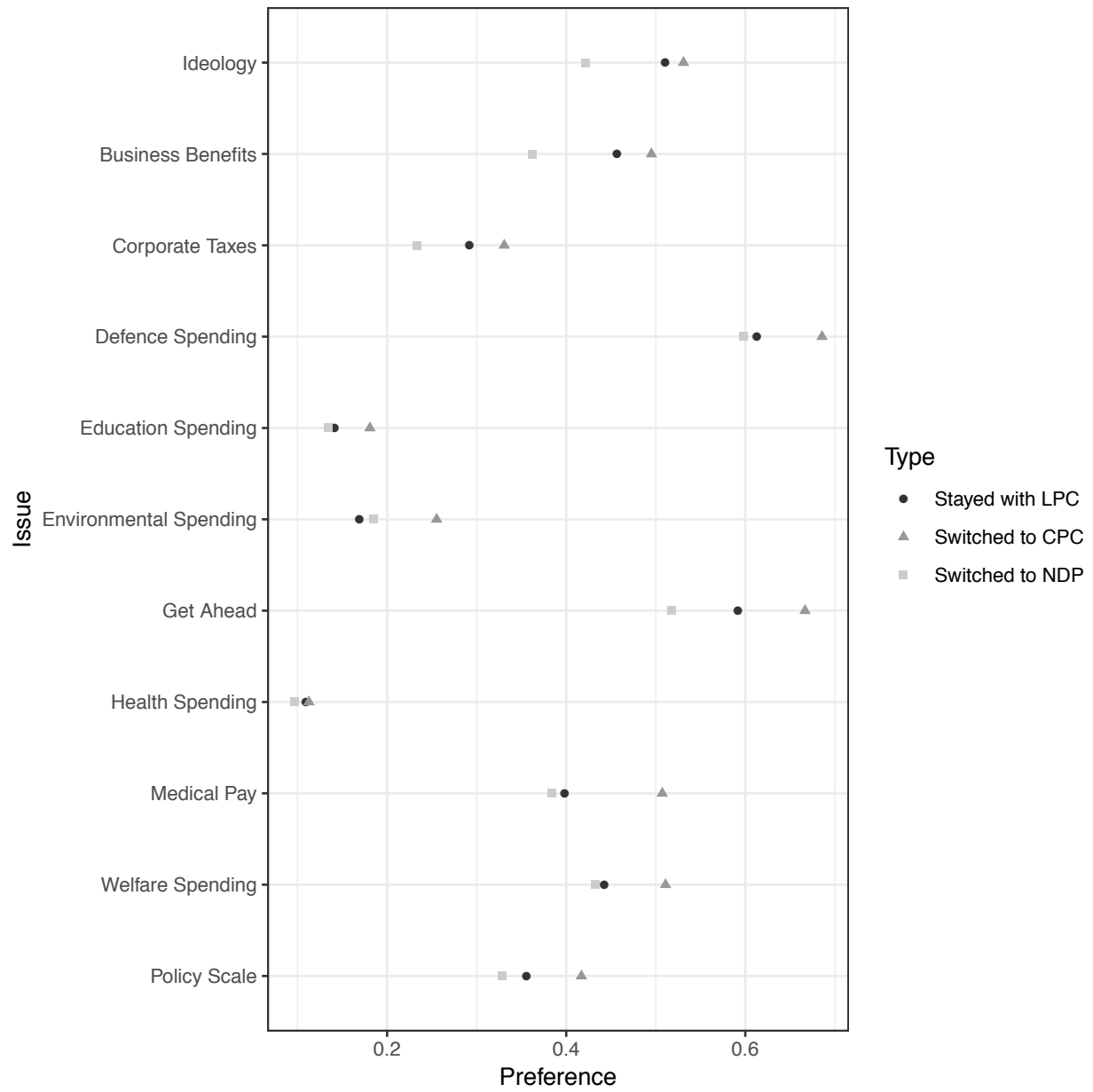


Table 4: Models of Initial Policy Preferences

	Model 1 DV: Ideological Self-Placement	Model 2 DV: Policy Scale
Intercept	0.52 (0.01)	3.19* (0.05)
Switched to NDP	-0.08* (0.03)	-0.23 (0.15)
Switched to CPC	0.02 (0.02)	0.56* (0.12)
2006 Election	0.00 (0.02)	0.14 (0.08)
2008 Election	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.18 (0.10)
Adjusted R ²	0.01	0.03
N	715	1042
Standard errors in parentheses		
*indicates significance at 0.05 level or below		

Note:

the

dependent variables in this table are measured the year of the change in vote choice. This table aims to assess differences in policy preferences between groups of voters.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tested whether respondents adjust their policy preferences when they change their vote choice. I have leveraged three periods of time covered by the CES 2004-2011 panel when I could assess both vote shifts and changes in policy preferences. I found that initial Liberal voters who shifted to the Conservatives shifted their policy preferences more to the right than those who stayed with the Liberals. It is unclear whether those who shifted to the NDP also changed their policy in the direction of their new party. That may be due to the relatively small number of voters who shifted in the panel though.

These findings have major implications for our understanding of electoral competition and policy representation. Since switchers sometimes change their policy preferences in the direction of the positions of their new party, they may then develop loyalty to that party if they then vote their policy preferences at the time of the next election. It may also make it more difficult for their previous party to win back such voters. In terms of policy representation, these findings reinforce previous findings that parties influence their partisans' preferences by showing that not only do they influence their partisans but they can also influence the policy preferences of voters who have recently shifted their votes to them. Thus, party influence on policy preferences is much more powerful than was previously believed.

This study does have some limitations. It is focused on a relatively small number of voters who shifted from the centrist Liberal Party to the centre-left NDP, on the one hand, and the centre-right Conservative Party, on the other hand. Unfortunately, in the panel data available, a

relatively small number of respondents made each one of those shifts. Future work should replicate these findings in other contexts in which larger numbers of voters shifted from different parties.

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