THE VIEW FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF THE AISLE:
CONGRESSIONAL PARTY SWITCHERS AND THEIR ENVIRONMENTS

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, numerous congressional scholars have found that political parties matter to members of Congress. Among the powers parties hold are the abilities to stop the passage of bills party leaders oppose, to reward or punish legislators for their behavior, and to protect their members from votes that divide their constituents. In this study I go beyond the role of parties’ direct control of the legislative process to examine how parties matter as part of a legislator’s overall environment. Using members of Congress who have switched parties as a natural experiment, I find that parties influence numerous elements of members’ environments. My results show that a member of Congress who switches parties can expect changes in the geographic makeup of his electoral support, in the types of campaign donors he attracts, and in the social networks in which he operates. I supplement these findings using information gained from interviews with some of the members in question.