

Are Republicans Leaving Their Party?

By Michael Agosta and Christy Lightbourn

In the days and weeks following the Capitol insurrection on January 6, 2021 major news outlets reported that significant numbers of registered voters were abandoning the Republican party. On January 27, Newsweek reported 30,000 defections from the Republican ranks in Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Maryland, North Carolina and Pennsylvania.¹ On February 10th, the New York Times suggested that 140,000 Republicans across 25 states had fled.² But a CNN story on February 14th suggested that these defectors represented little more than statistical noise.³

So, which assertion is correct?

VVN examined both current and historical voter files in a dozen states to track party changers among registered voters. We sought to discover trends from previous cycles to compare the results with the 2020 election, paying particular attention to party changers in the weeks following Trump's victory in 2016. Our analysis largely concurs with the CNN story.

Neither party has seen significant statistical gains or losses since last November's election.

Some Republicans were clearly repulsed by the events of January 6th, but the exodus from the party represents a tiny fraction of all registered Republicans especially at the statewide level. In the six states referenced by the Newsweek article, total current Republican registration stands at roughly 14.4 million. 30,000 defections represent just two-tenths of one percent of all Republicans in those states. That 30,000 figure is even less impressive if defections from the Democrats were factored in. The New York Times figure of 140,000 defectors is equally miniscule when considering the total Republican registration in all 25 of the states they observed. The Times analysis did account for Democratic defections and found a net gain by the Democrats of just 61,000 voters in 25 states, a mere 2,440 per state.⁴

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<https://www.newsweek.com/over-30000-republican-voters-change-party-affiliation-after-pro-trump-capitol-riot-1565011>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/10/us/politics/republicans-leaving-party.html>

³ <https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/14/politics/gop-demise-exaggerated/index.html>

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/10/us/politics/republicans-leaving-party.html>

Party defections in the weeks after a federal election occur primarily through voters renewing their driver’s licenses through the Department of Motor Vehicles. There are few reports of voters who are NOT renewing a license actively calling their Board of Elections to abandon their party. Unless far more lopsided losses to the GOP ranks emerge in the coming months, it’s likely that the initial media reports of large-scale defections from the Republicans are overstated.

Finally, since most party defectors change their status to Independent rather than switching to the other major party, it’s quite unlikely in America’s hyper-partisan atmosphere that these defectors will have any impact upon the 2022 midterms or that the Republican defectors might cross party lines to vote for a Democratic Presidential candidate in significant numbers four years from now.

While VVN is only beginning to receive 2020 voter files, preliminary analysis is showing a levelling off of party changers through February. In Nevada, we examined party changers from December 2020 to February 2021. A fairly high percentage of party changers in the Silver State switched major parties, with almost a third of Democratic defectors moving to the GOP (1,052 out of 3,318) which is rare, but the total churn represents a tiny percentage of total Nevada voters.

Nevada Party Registration Movement Dec. 2016 - Feb. 2017:

Democrat to Republican	1,052
Republican to Democrat	737
Republican: All party Changers	2,832
Democrat: All party Changers	3,318

Somewhat breathless media reports of party-line defections are fairly common after elections, but long term trends rarely, if ever, emerge. During the 2016 election cycle the narrative suggested that voters were switching parties before the primary election especially in states where party registration dictates the choice of a primary ballot.⁵ A hotly contested primary on

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<https://www.floridatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2016/03/11/voters-switch-political-parties-vote-primary/81554134/>

either the Democratic or Republican side can result in some cross-party registration activity but it is seldom significant.

Comparing defectors from 2016 to 2020 is illustrative; 2020 party defection rates are in fact little changed from voter's behavior after the 2016 general.

ARIZONA

The New York Times stated that in Arizona 10,000 Republicans changed their voter registration in the weeks after Capitol riots. VVN examined changes in the Arizona voter file from December, 2016 to February, 2017 to identify defectors. We found that 12,018 Republicans changed their registration, while 13,753 Democrats fled the fold. While the Times stated that the number of voters changing their registration was larger than normal without an upcoming election, our 2016 analysis does not bear that assertion out. Republican defection rates are essentially flat from 2016 to 2020.

Arizona Party Registration Movement Dec. 2016 - Feb. 2017:

Democrat to Republican	1,958
Republican to Democrat	2,501
Republican: All party Changers	12,018
Democrat: All party Changers	13,753

DELAWARE

In Delaware, VVN found that 3,029 voters changed their registration from Republican to Democrat following the 2020 election whereas 2,337 Democrats changed their registration from Democrat to Republican, providing the Democrats a meager margin of just over 600 voters. However, the Democrats recorded more total defections, losing 8,292 voters to the GOP's 6,974.

Delaware Registration Movement Nov. 2020 - Feb 2021:

Democrat to Republican	2,337
Republican to Democrat	3,029
Republican: All party Changers	6,974
Democrat: All party Changers	8,292

COLORADO

After the 2016 general election, Colorado saw 1,000 more voters switch their registration from Republican to Democrat than from Democrat to Republican. However, our data shows that in aggregate, 12,092 Democrats and 12,146 Republicans switched parties, primarily selecting Independent. The Hill states that 4,500 Republicans in Colorado changed their voter registration in the first month of 2021 and only a fraction of that number left the Democratic party.⁶ That monthly pace is somewhat higher than in 2016 but it may not hold in the coming weeks and months.

Colorado Party Registration Movement Dec. 2016 - Apr. 2017:

Democrat to Republican	1,846
Republican to Democrat	2,918
Republican: All party Changers	12,146
Democrat: All party Changers	12,092

Stay tuned. VVN is tracking changes by party for all voter file releases in 2021 and will be reporting trends to our C4 partners. For now, it appears that while a few more Republicans may have abandoned the GOP ship in the first few months after the insurrection at the Capitol than in a typical year, it is not yet indicative of a large enough trend to move the needle on either the 2022 midterm or the 2024 general.

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<https://thehill.com/homenews/state-watch/536113-tens-of-thousands-of-voters-drop-republican-affiliation-after-capitol>

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