Vote Switching in the United States: Insights from ANES and GSS

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1. Introduction

Voter volatility, where individuals change their party support from one election cycle to another, shapes electoral outcomes and signals shifts in public opinion. Leveraging two prominent datasets, the American National Election Studies (ANES) and the General Social Survey (GSS), we seek to investigate the extent and drivers of vote switching within and across different time periods.

2. Research Questions

Individual-Level Switching

• What demographic and attitudinal factors predict whether an individual changes their vote between elections?

• Do major political or economic events significantly affect switching rates?

Population-Level Shifts

• How have aggregate vote preferences changed over time in repeated cross-sections?

• Are there notable trend breaks in vote choice aligned with major events (e.g., economic crises, key legislative changes)?

3. Data

ANES: We will use panel waves in which the same respondents are surveyed in multiple elections (for example, 2012-2016-2020), capturing the actual individual-level vote choice and the ID of the party over time.

GSS: We will utilize two components:

1. Limited Panel (e.g., 2006–2010–2014) where voting-related questions are repeated with the same respondents.

2. Repeated Cross-Sections (1972–present) to track aggregate trends in party identification, voting intention, and political attitudes across different cohorts.

4. Methodology

Because we are still exploring data structures and availability, our approach remains flexible. We anticipate at least two major analytical tracks.

4.1. Panel / Longitudinal Approaches

Data Preparation: We will locate ANES panel waves (e.g. 2012-2016-2020) and GSS limited panel cohorts (e.g. 2006-2010-2014). After confirming consistency in voting or party ID questions, we will clean and merge these datasets, applying appropriate weights if available.

Descriptive and Transition Analyses: Transition matrices will illustrate the proportion of respondents switching parties (e.g., Republican to Democrat, Democrat to Other) between consecutive waves. Preliminary profiles (age, education, ideology, etc.) will help us pinpoint who is more likely to switch.

Modeling Approaches: We will employ logistic or multinomial regression to identify key predictors (e.g. demographics, political trust) of switching, potentially incorporating event indicators for major political or economic disruptions. If sample sizes permit, we will use techniques such as Random Forest to uncover non-linear relationships that may be overlooked by traditional models. In cases where multiple panel waves exist per respondent, fixed or random effects models will help control for unobserved individual heterogeneity.

4.2. Cross-Sectional Trend Analysis

Long-Term Trend Construction: We will compile repeated cross-sections from GSS and ANES to create annual (or biennial) measures of party identification and self-reported voting intentions.

Time-Series and Event Studies: We will visualize party support over time and use structural break tests (e.g., Chow or Quandt-Andrews) to detect any significant trend changes. Event study methods will be incorporated to examine potential shifts following major events (e.g., 9/11, recession years, landmark legislation).

Exploratory Machine Learning: If data granularity allows, we will experiment with unsupervised learning methods (e.g., clustering) to identify distinct voter segments and explore whether new or unexpected alignments emerge over decades. We may also integrate text analysis where open-ended responses are available, using NLP techniques to identify themes in respondents' political reasoning.