JUSTICE BREYER, dissenting.

I agree with JUSTICE ALITO that New York v. Belton, 453 U. S. 454 (1981), is best read as setting forth a bright-line rule that permits a warrantless search of the passenger compartment of an automobile incident to the lawful arrest of an occupant—regardless of the danger the arrested individual in fact poses. I also agree with JUSTICE STEVENS, however, that the rule can produce results divorced from its underlying Fourth Amendment rationale. Compare Belton, supra, with Chimel v. California, 395 U. S. 752, 764 (1969) (explaining that the rule allowing contemporaneous searches is justified by the need to prevent harm to a police officer or destruction of evidence of the crime). For that reason I would look for a better rule—were the question before us one of first impression.

The matter, however, is not one of first impression, and that fact makes a substantial difference. The Belton rule has been followed not only by this Court in Thornton v. United States, 541 U. S. 615 (2004), but also by numerous other courts. Principles of stare decisis must apply, and those who wish this Court to change a well-established legal precedent—where, as here, there has been considerable reliance on the legal rule in question—bear a heavy burden. Cf. Leegin Creative Leather Products, Inc. v. PSKS, Inc., 551 U. S. 877, ___ (2007) (slip op., at 17–19) (BREYER, J., dissenting). I have not found that burden
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Nor do I believe that the other considerations ordinarily relevant when determining whether to overrule a case are satisfied. I consequently join Justice Alito’s dissenting opinion with the exception of Part II-E.