

WHO ARE THE MOST EFFECTIVE LAWMAKERS IN CONGRESS?

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Members of Congress are typically identified by party affiliation, perhaps with modifiers such as “moderate” or “tea party.” Journalists describe legislators that way; so do political scientists, albeit with more precise measures of ideological positions. When citizens enter the voting booth to choose their representatives, they rely on party identification, biographical snippets, and perhaps positions on high-profile issues. But when the election is over, the main responsibility of members of Congress goes beyond being a partisan or an ideologue. First and foremost, members are *lawmakers*. Unless representatives write laws and push them forward in committees and on the floor of the legislature, national policies do not change.

Members of Congress turn out to vary immensely in their lawmaking abilities. Some introduce almost no legislation, and what they do propose never sees the light of day. In contrast, others work through the details of the thorniest policy problems, sponsor bills with workable solutions, build supportive coalitions, and overcome opposition. As empirical researchers, we have discovered that legislative effectiveness can be measured systematically – to shed new light on nearly everything important about the workings of the U.S. Congress.

Measuring Legislative Effectiveness

To develop our new measure, we gathered information on every bill introduced in the House of Representatives since the early 1970s. We tracked each bill through five major stages of lawmaking – introduction of the bill, action in committee, reaching the full House floor for debate, passing the House, and actually becoming law (after a favorable vote by the Senate and signing by the president). We scored each bill, but gave more weight to major policy changes and less weight to purely commemorative bills (such as naming post offices). By linking each bill to its sponsor, we gave every member of Congress a *Legislative Effectiveness Score*, capturing his or her share of everything accomplished in each Congress from 1973 to the present.

Analyzing the scores reveals some obvious trends. Legislators who serve as committee chairs are more effective than those without such institutional positions. Serving as a member of the majority party in control of the House boosts a legislator’s score, as does greater seniority. But we also uncovered fascinating new insights beyond what is already widely known:

- **Women are more effective legislators than men**, on average, when other relevant factors are taken into account.
- **The influence of female legislators depends on whether their party holds the House majority.** Women in the *minority party* reach across party lines and advance their priorities at a far greater rate than men. Women in the majority party used to be more effective than men. But in the recent polarized Congresses, the inclination of female legislators to build broad

consensus has been trumped by the more dominant partisan approaches of men. These findings hold for Democratic women and Republican women alike.

- **Legislators' electoral prospects affect their activities as lawmakers.** Members from very safe seats seem less motivated to engage in active lawmaking. They introduce fewer bills and tally lower scores on our index. Yet legislators facing tight electoral battles fare no better at guiding bills through the lawmaking process. Tellingly, the most effective lawmakers are representatives in moderately safe seats – neither too hotly contested to turn their attention away from lawmaking nor so safe as to make the representative feel complacent about doing little lawmaking.

The Larger Significance of Skillful Lawmaking

The lawmaking efforts and skills of individual representatives shape Congress in crucial ways.

- **Effectiveness helps explain who serves in Congress.** We find that House members whose effectiveness scores fall in the bottom half of their freshman class are fifty percent more likely to become frustrated with lawmaking and voluntarily retire from the House. In contrast, those who are above average in effectiveness during their freshman term are fifty percent more likely to seek higher office soon thereafter.
- Political scientists have spent decades debating the extent to which political party pressures affect final floor votes, but our index suggests that scholars are looking in the wrong place. **Most of the advantage of being in the majority party takes place inside House committees that develop new bills and determine whether they ever get to the floor at all.** In committees, bills sponsored by members of the majority are three to five times more likely to receive hearings, go through markups, and get voted out of committee. Members from the minority party usually cannot get their bills through committees, but if their bills do reach the full House they pass more often than bills sponsored by majority members.
- Effectiveness scores can be calculated for major issue areas, where legislators' skills influence overall results. **In usually gridlocked areas like health care, skillful policy entrepreneurs make a big difference in whether anything happens.** Our scores pinpoint effective entrepreneurs. On health issues, Democratic Representative Henry Waxman of California has a record of propelling action. Similarly, Republican Representative Lamar Smith of Texas turns out to be an effective entrepreneur on labor issues and job creation. Because today's Congress is so gridlocked, tracking the activities of such entrepreneurs is essential to assessing the likelihood of any policy changes.

As political scientists, we developed effectiveness scores to improve research on Congress. But our scores can also help journalists better inform voters about legislators who work steadfastly to make government work better. If Americans demand lawmaking effectiveness rather than just ideological purity, incentives will change for politicians who run for and serve in Congress.

Read more in Craig Volden, Alan E. Wiseman, and Dana Wittmer, “When are Women More Effective Lawmakers than Men?” *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 2 (2013): 326-341; and Craig Volden and Alan E. Wiseman, “Legislative Effectiveness and Representation,” in *Congress Reconsidered, 10th Edition*, edited by Lawrence C. Dodd and Bruce I. Oppenheimer (CQ Press, 2012); and Craig Volden and Alan E. Wiseman, *Legislative Effectiveness in the United States Congress: The Lawmakers* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).