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DO VOTERS CARE ABOUT THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THEIR REPRESENTATIVES?

The Center for Effective Lawmaking (“CEL”) conducted an in-depth study to explore whether voters are more likely to support politicians who have been very effective in advancing legislation while in office. The study concluded that when voters are given information about their politician’s level of lawmaking effectiveness from an unbiased source, they are more likely to support effective lawmakers. This result suggests that some American voters *do* care about how effective their policymakers are at advancing legislation, and that educating voters on their elected officials’ lawmaking effectiveness has the potential to influence elections.

The recent November general elections brought significant partisan change to Congress. Following these shifts, it is important to understand what specific factors might influence voters’ preferences over candidates. How effective a legislator is in advancing her policies could be an important factor for American voters to keep in mind when making their decisions between candidates.

In the study conducted by the CEL, however, it was revealed that most Americans have very little knowledge about a representative’s legislative effectiveness; and they typically assume that their representatives have an average level of lawmaking effectiveness. It is this lack of knowledge, rather than a lack of interest or concern, that might explain why people do not vote for effective lawmakers.

“When presented with information [about a politician’s legislative effectiveness], constituents become more likely to approve of the effective lawmakers, and less likely to approve of ineffective lawmakers. Partisanship does not appear to moderate the effect of information provision on attitude formation.”

The relationship between knowledge about legislative effectiveness and voter support for effective lawmakers is strong. More specifically, the authors of the study found that when a voter learns that her representative is “highly” effective in lawmaking, that voter is 10 percentage points more likely to approve of the legislator.

These findings have clear implications for elections and electoral outcomes. Currently, it appears that effective lawmaking is not rewarded by voter support, as there is very little meaningful relationship between an incumbent’s voteshare and her lawmaking effectiveness. Hence, politicians have little electoral motivation to advance their legislative initiatives through Congress. The results of the study suggest, however, that giving voters credible information about their representatives’ lawmaking effectiveness can influence their voting decisions, which in turn, can contribute to more effective lawmakers being elected to Congress

The Center for Effective Lawmaking seeks to advance the generation, communication, and use of new knowledge about the effectiveness of individual lawmakers and legislative institutions in Congress. We envision a Congress comprised of effective lawmakers, strong institutional capacity, and the incentive structure needed to address America’s greatest public policy challenges.

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