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Do Experienced Legislative Staff Promote Effective Lawmaking?

Members of Congress seek to allocate their scarce staff resources carefully, given their multiple, sometimes competing objectives. When it comes to staffing offices, there are many tough decisions to make. However, the Center for Effective Lawmaking (“CEL”) has new research demonstrating that a targeted strategy to recruit and retain the most experienced legislative staff in Congress may pay the greatest dividends.

The CEL conducted a study to explore the extent to which legislative staff contribute to a Representative’s ability to effectively legislate. There is a clear positive relationship between staff’s total legislative experience and a Representative’s ability to advance legislation. But new members of Congress benefit most significantly from hiring experienced legislative staff when they first arrive on Capitol Hill.

Further, we found that committee chairs receive a substantial legislative boost when working with experienced staff, whereas non-chairs typically do not acquire the same benefits. Our study demonstrated that a greater length of past service by a Representative’s most experienced legislative staffer increases the effectiveness of both chairs and non-chairs alike.

It is widely believed that a skilled legislative staff is crucial for a lawmaker’s success. An experienced staff may engage with stakeholders, negotiate legislative details, and navigate the practices and procedures of the House more effectively, providing their boss with a crucial edge in their lawmaking efforts. Yet our comprehensive dataset of all staff who served in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1994 provides information regarding who served as a staffer, when he or she served, and how he or she was compensated. The study focuses primarily on the scope of legislative staff work experience to generate a *Total Legislative Staff Experience* variable.

These findings have clear implications for legislative outcomes. Committee chairs with experienced legislative staff will yield significant success in the lawmaking process. Additionally, early-career lawmakers benefit substantially from hiring experienced legislative staff as opposed to retaining campaign staff that lack Congressional expertise. Specific and targeted attempts when it comes to the retention of experienced Congressional staff are likely to be more fruitful than broad-brush reforms to increase staff size or compensation.

“Legislators do not generally benefit from large legislative staffs, but rather from having individual legislative staffers with high levels of experience,” states the paper’s author and CEL Co-Director, Professor Craig Volden. “This finding suggests that a targeted strategy to retain the most experienced legislative staff in Congress may pay the greatest dividends in regard to lawmaking.”

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