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Contact: Allison Carter, Operations Director
Center for Effective Lawmaking
University of Virginia & Vanderbilt University
alb3v@virginia.edu
(434) 924-7064



NEW RESEARCH: Elite Education and Legislative Behavior in the U.S. Congress

Does a degree from a more selective university or college make a difference on how effective lawmakers are once elected to U.S. Congress? The answer is yes, but also no.

The Center for Effective Lawmaking (“CEL”) released new research regarding elite education and its impact on legislative behavior in Congress. Members of Congress (both Democrat and Republican) who attended elite institutions are more likely to propose legislation that is both more liberal and more substantive. However, these legislative proposals see the highest rate of success when Democrats are in control of Congress and when representatives are among a network of other elite-educated Congress members.

Evaluating data from 1973-2014, the CEL discovered that between a third and a half all of members of Congress obtained degrees from more selective institutions. Such backgrounds are correlated with more liberal viewpoints regardless of political party. Because of these more liberal viewpoints, a notable pattern has emerged. Over the past half century, the number of elite-educated Democrats has remained high while the number of elite-educated Republicans has decreased significantly.

Since there is a connection between elite educational background, political leanings, and legislative effectiveness, voters may use this information to assess whether their legislator’s actions align with their preferences for policymaking in Congress.

“Candidates often point to various attributes, such as their personal characteristics, prior careers, and work experiences, in attempts to influence voters’ perceptions about their likely performance in office,” said Professor Craig Volden, the paper’s author and Co-Director of the Center for Effective Lawmaking at the University of Virginia. “In this paper we have focused on one common but understudied background characteristic – whether a legislator acquired a degree from an elite educational institution – and explored whether the acquisition of such degrees corresponds with observable differences across legislators.”

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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