



Center for Effective Lawmaking

How Modern Lawmakers Advertise Their Legislative Effectiveness to Constituents

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Abstract

In a complex information environment, members of Congress must communicate to their constituents their value as a representative. Specifically, they aim to convince voters that they are effective representatives and therefore ought to be reelected. Modern scholarship has focused largely on legislators' effectiveness as lawmakers in areas like bill introduction, sponsorship, and shepherding of legislation through congressional procedures (Volden and Wiseman 2014). But legislators do more than traditional lawmaking activities; they also engage in representational acts of advocacy and district-focused activity. This expanded notion of representational effectiveness is what legislators must publicize to constituents in order to maintain and build support and stay in office. Drawing on textual analysis of nearly 90,000 official newsletters from House members to their constituents from 2009-2020 (Cormack 2021), we demonstrate that legislators actively publicize these three types of effectiveness, and the ways in which their communication strategies depend on personal, electoral, and institutional factors.

Introduction

How legislators communicate with their constituents is critical to both constituency representation and accountability. In deciding how to talk about their work in Washington, legislators can shape what their constituents know about them and how constituents will evaluate them. Mayhew's classic work (1974) famously notes that this dynamic encourages legislators to advertise their efforts to their constituents in order to improve their reelection chances. The opportunity for legislators to tell constituents how hard they are working on their behalf is arguably even more valuable in today's political climate where the public holds Congress in low regard and political cynicism is prevalent. One way to appeal to constituents, then, is to tout one's effectiveness as a legislator. But what does it mean to be an effective legislator, and how is this conveyed to constituents?

The idea of legislative effectiveness is not new (e.g., Frantzich 1979), and scholars remain interested in understanding legislators' productivity or degree of success as lawmakers (e.g., Volden and Wiseman 2014). The notion of being an effective member of Congress is a powerful idea that gets at the reality that not all legislators are equal – some are better at their job than others, or take on varying portions of the legislative workload (Hall 1996). Being an effective member of Congress is also important because voters want to be represented by someone who will “do a good job.” Collectively, Americans do not think that Congress is doing a good job, with only 19% of Americans saying they approve of how Congress is handling its job (Gallup 2023), and only 40% of voters approve of the job *their own* member of Congress is doing (Pew 2014). Given this context, legislators should communicate their effectiveness to their constituents in order to bolster their reputation among their constituents and improve their electoral standing (Volden and Wiseman 2014, 200).

Here, we first argue that being an effective legislator, although crucial, is just one important role that constituents have come to expect their representatives to fulfill. Voters hold legislators

accountable for a broader *representational effectiveness* that can be demonstrated not only in the lawmaking process, but also in advocacy and constituency service. To demonstrate advocacy, legislators take numerous actions that buttress the official lawmaking process, such as meeting with stakeholders, contacting executive branch officials, and taking positions on issues. Legislators who engage in these advocacy activities are participating in the broader work of Congress and actively reflecting the interests and preferences of their district. In addition, members of Congress can be effective representatives by serving their constituents through district-based activities like attending events and hosting town halls, which are outside of lawmaking but valued by their constituents. Together with legislative effectiveness, these actions are undertaken and communicated to constituents because members understand — and constituents appreciate — these multiple elements of representation (e.g., Butler et al. 2021; Grant and Rudolph 2004; Harden 2015; Lapinski et al. 2016; Peterson 2022).

Second, we contend that that members' choices about how to communicate this more wide-ranging effectiveness are influenced by three broad sets of factors: personal attributes of the legislator such as their race, party, and gender; the legislator's power and institutional position within Congress; and their relationship with their home district. Representatives are alternately empowered and restricted by these influences, which vary across members and therefore lead to differing communication strategies. Using textual analysis of nearly 90,000 official newsletters from House members to their constituents from 2009 – 2020 (Cormack 2021), we demonstrate novel connections between members' institutional, personal, and district considerations on the one hand, and the variety of messages they use to communicate their broader representational effectiveness to their constituents on the other.

We find strong evidence that members regularly tout not just their effectiveness in lawmaking, but also their advocacy and district effectiveness, when communicating with

constituents. Moreover, different types of legislators emphasize different forms of effectiveness in the ways we expect. For instance, the legislators who most frequently communicate their lawmaking effectiveness are those in an institutional position to do so—that is, those with personal records of legislative achievement, and whose party is in the majority. Meanwhile, legislators invoke their effectiveness in terms of non-legislative advocacy and district activity in order to compensate for institutional and personal disadvantages in lawmaking by highlighting other activities. These effects are clearest for junior lawmakers eager to prove themselves, and for non-white and (in the case of advocacy) female lawmakers who have historically been excluded from positions of legislative power. This paper makes an important contribution by building on the concept of legislative effectiveness to include three types of a broader representational effectiveness, and reveals how members themselves use constituent communication to bolster their reputation as an effective representative. Our results demonstrate that effective representation in Congress (and the communication thereof) is multidimensional, and that these dimensions are dynamically influenced by members' personal attributes, institutional position, and conditions in the district.

Reconsidering Effective Representation

There is a widespread perception that Congress – and its members – are not doing their jobs. One way that legislators try to combat this perception is to talk about what they do while they are in Washington, and more specifically to make known their efforts and success (Mayhew 1974). Since Mayhew's work on the "electoral connection", more modern work has shown that legislators make strategic choices about how to present themselves to their constituents through the content and form of their communications in order to reap electoral benefits (e.g., Grimmer et al. 2012; Hassell and Monson 2016; Meinke 2009; Taylor 2017). Research has shown that constituents are

responsive to legislators' self-presentation through official communications, and that legislator-provided messages affect voters' impressions of incumbents (Rogowski and Stone 2020). These messages are largely designed to positively influence constituents' opinions of whether they are doing their job effectively.

But what does it mean to be an effective legislator in the modern Congress? Generally, scholars examine how effective members of Congress are at their jobs by focusing on tangible lawmaking activities—for example, the percentage of bills sponsored by a legislator that become law. A more nuanced approach is the legislative effectiveness framework established by Volden and Wiseman (2014), which focuses on how successful legislators are in advancing their bills through the stages of the lawmaking process. With their emphasis on members of Congress as lawmakers, Volden and Wiseman's Legislative Effectiveness Scores (LES) reveal just how much variation there is in legislators' effectiveness, as well as some of the factors that contribute to different levels of effectiveness. Using this metric, scholars have examined the roles of gender (Volden, Wiseman, and Wittmer 2013, 2018), institutional position (Volden and Wiseman 2017; Stacy et al. 2019; Lewallen 2020), primary competition (Barber and Schmidt 2019; Truel et al. 2022), and congressional staff (Crosson et al. 2020) in explaining why some legislators are more effective than others. Looking at the content of legislation, Lauterbach et al. (2022) examine whether legislators who propose more specific and detailed legislation are more effective legislators. Other scholars are expanding the concept of legislative effectiveness to include more unorthodox forms of lawmaking—for example, bill proposals that eventually are incorporated into other bills, and thus are successful in becoming law, even if through an indirect path (Casas et al. 2020, Eatough and Preece 2020; Volden and Wiseman 2023).

Yet, members of Congress are more than lawmakers; they are also representatives of their district with a responsibility to make present the voices and interests of their constituents, and to pay

attention to their home districts outside the policymaking sphere. To examine effective representation therefore means asking how well individual members of Congress do these jobs. It also means reconsidering how they communicate these multiple roles to their voters. In his classic work on the “electoral connection,” Mayhew (1974) emphasized that members of Congress communicate to their constituents information about their activities that includes roll call votes, legislative sponsorship, and other lawmaking activity; but which also includes credit-claiming for local projects and pork, attending local (often non-political) events, and taking positions on issues of the day even if those issues are not dealt with legislatively. Together, these types of activities and their advertisement to constituents amount not just to effective lawmaking, but to effective representation. Including this latter set of actions, we argue, offers a more comprehensive picture of what voters expect of their elected representatives, and therefore what legislators can and must talk about with their constituents in order to retain their support.

Thus, we argue that legislators have incentives to communicate to voters their effectiveness as a representative. We conceive of this role as having three parts.¹ The first of these is *Lawmaking Effectiveness*, which draws on Volden and Wiseman (2014)’s influential work on what it means to be an effective lawmaker and to move legislative proposals through the official congressional process. To this core definition, we add other forms of procedural effectiveness such as participation in congressional committees, floor speeches, and other actions that are not strictly legislative, but which are widely agreed to be essential to congressional lawmaking. Voters have traditionally

¹ We do not propose that these three types of effective representation are exhaustive. We are proposing a generalized rather than specific or comprehensive framework for how legislators communicate their effectiveness of representation. The observation and coding of members’ communications via their e-newsletters resulted in the observation of these three broad areas of effectiveness. Crucially, these are areas of effective representation that all legislators could feasibly engage with. For example, some members can and do effectively represent on meaningful but more exclusive identities like race, gender, or ideology, or in specific institutional settings not available to all members. Future work might consider further such expansions on how legislators communicate other kinds of effectiveness to their constituents and other audiences.

rewarded members of Congress who demonstrate legislative prowess (Treul et al 2022). Legislators therefore have a clear incentive to emphasize this kind of effectiveness in their communications with constituents—the better they can make the case that they are skilled lawmakers, the higher the cost for constituents to replace them with someone new.

However, even passing observation of legislator communication tells us that they tout far more than their effectiveness on active legislation. Thus, the second component of effective representation we term *Advocacy Effectiveness*, or the many actions that are part of the “soft” legislative process like meeting with stakeholders, or working with colleagues on an issue. Additionally, Advocacy Effectiveness includes non-legislative symbolic actions that legislators take that give voice to their constituents’ preferences, such as speaking on the House floor, sending letters to the administration, and expressing preferences or concern about an issue. These Washington-based activities are not strictly part of the lawmaking process, but they encompass the many ways in which legislators take identifiable, sometimes small, actions to show that they are doing their job as representatives. These actions also provide legislators the opportunity to remind voters of their positions on issues even if tangible legislative or procedural activity has not taken place. This is a particularly important element of active representation given the steady increase in legislative gridlock that has characterized the past two decades of congressional policymaking (Binder 2011, Thurber and Yoshinaka 2015; Bolton 2022; Reeves and Rogowski 2022). If legislators have fewer legislative achievements with which they can entice voters, they are still able to engage in these softer legislative activities and pronouncements, and to advertise these advocacy activities to voters as evidence of their effectiveness.

The third component of being an effective representative is *District Effectiveness*, or actions taken in the district to communicate with and represent constituents. We argue that to be an

effective representative, a legislator must make themselves present in the district and be available to their constituents through town halls, coffee chats, and meetings with local organizations (Clarke and Markovits 2022). Legislators are commonly criticized, both by campaign opponents and in the media, for being “absentee” representatives, rarely seen in the district and thus lacking a personal connection with voters. In several high profile election losses, senior incumbents’ defeats were attributed to losing touch with the district, which provides an anecdotal, but powerful, lesson about the importance of making sure voters know you are working in the district.² Activities undertaken in the district—and making voters aware of these activities via communications like newsletters—can influence legislators’ relatability, authenticity, and representational accountability in ways that often have little or nothing to do with lawmaking.

Building on the existing concept of legislative effectiveness to include not only lawmaking effectiveness, but also these complementary notions of effectiveness in other areas of representation, renders a more complete picture of the multi-faceted job of members of Congress.³ We argue that because voters are looking for effective representation beyond lawmaking, legislators are highly motivated to advertise multiple aspects of their effectiveness. Constituents naturally want a member who “works for them” by being engaged in the processes of policymaking and governance. This work includes bringing their voices to Capitol Hill via non-legislative advocacy, and through direct district work that demonstrates local attentiveness. Indeed, studies show that constituents value members of Congress who represent their preferences on issues, as well as those

² Most prominent of these examples are the defeat of former Majority Whip Eric Cantor (R-VA) in 2014 and Rep. Joseph Crowley (D-NY) in 2018.

³ It is worth noting that both Advocacy Effectiveness and District Effectiveness differ from Lawmaking Effectiveness in that there is not an objective standard for success of these activities in the same way that we can evaluate the success of lawmaking activities. Lawmaking effectiveness by its very nature provides clear markers of progress in a known process (e.g., whether a legislator sponsored a bill, was the subject of a committee hearing, or passed the House). In contrast, it is hard to give an objective standard for advocacy effectiveness or district effectiveness. However, in this paper we are concerned with whether legislators *communicate to constituents* their actions that are indicative of each type of effectiveness, and this can readily be measured as discussed in the next section.

who provide quality constituency service (e.g., Box-Steffensmeier et al. 2003; Lapinski et al. 2016; Costa 2021).

Influences on Effectiveness Communication

How exactly do legislators publicize their effective behaviors to their constituents? We argue that legislators make deliberate decisions about whether to call constituents' attention to their lawmaking, advocacy, or district effectiveness. Rooted in the idea of legislators' styles and the presentation of self (e.g., Fenno 1978; Grimmer 2014; Bernhard and Sulkin 2019), we examine how legislators communicate their representational effectiveness using official email newsletters sent from House members to their constituents during the period from 2009-2020 (Cormack 2021). As described in the following section, we analyze the language used in these newsletters to assess the extent to which each House member communicates their effectiveness to their constituents.

While there is an electoral logic for all legislators to make the case to their constituents about their broader representational effectiveness, this does not mean that all legislators communicate effectiveness in the same way. Rather, we argue that a variety of important factors should influence this communication. Legislators differ from each other in terms of the opportunities, motivations, and restrictions they face in their pursuit to retain the support of their constituents. Thus, we examine the individual legislator, institutional, and district-level factors that differentiate legislators from each other and are most likely to affect how they talk about effectiveness to their constituents.

First, we consider legislator-specific factors. Given well-established findings about differences in representational styles among descriptive legislator subgroups, we examine whether factors like gender, race, and party affect how legislators communicate their effectiveness to their constituents. In particular, for female and minority legislators who have traditionally been

underrepresented in Congress and in positions of power within the institution, our expanded definition of effectiveness can uncover new dynamics by highlighting the kinds of work in which these legislators are more likely to engage and how they communicate effective representation to their constituents. Indeed, there is evidence that women and minority legislators have largely been shut out of institutional power and advantages, and so have been forced to look elsewhere to demonstrate their effectiveness as representatives (e.g., Griffin and Keane 2011; Minta 2011; Miler 2018; Eatough and Preece 2020; Peay 2021). Thus, we expect that women and minority legislators will be more likely to advertise their effectiveness in advocacy and district service. They may also be more likely to advertise what lawmaking effectiveness they are able to accomplish in order to counter prevailing stereotypes about their effectiveness in this area (Pearson and Dancey 2011).

We also consider potential party and ideological differences in how legislators choose to communicate their effectiveness to constituents. In a polarized era, we expect that more moderate legislators will communicate a pragmatic and less ideological message that emphasizes getting the job done. As a result, moderates will advertise their effectiveness to their constituents as part of this image, and in contrast to their ideologically extreme colleagues. From a partisan standpoint, we do not anticipate differences by party in legislators' propensity to talk about their advocacy effectiveness or district effectiveness. When it comes to talking about legislative effectiveness, the expectation is unclear. Conventional wisdom suggests that Democrats are more supportive of active government and policymaking, but Republicans' use of procedural tools to block or repeal progressive legislation and executive branch appointments during the period of our study means that both partisans may advertise their effectiveness using the legislative process to advance their preferred policies.⁴

⁴ Our coding of language related to Lawmaking Effectiveness would capture this type of procedural blockage as it captures actions around making amendments to legislation, and negatively-oriented action phrases like "voted against,"

We also examine whether technically effective legislators, as defined by Volden and Wiseman's Legislative Effectiveness Scores, are more likely to tout their lawmaking effectiveness.⁵ We anticipate that members with higher scores will communicate their legislative effectiveness not only because they have more to talk about, but also because they see their legislative success as part of their personal brand. Whether more effective lawmakers are also more likely to talk about non-lawmaking forms of effectiveness is less clear, as a member with a high LES may be no more likely (and perhaps even less likely) to talk about advocacy effectiveness or district effectiveness since their relative strength is in lawmaking.

Second, because these communications are undertaken largely with the aim of winning or retaining constituents' approval, several electoral and district factors need to be taken into account. We expect that legislators from electorally vulnerable districts will be more likely to advertise all types of effectiveness since lawmaking, advocacy, and district service all provide representation to their constituents that challengers simply cannot match. We include several measures capturing partisan electoral competition: first, a measure of district safety for each legislator based on the percent of the vote their party's previous presidential nominee received in the last election; and second, a national-level yearly indicator of partisan mood using the RealClearPolitics "generic congressional ballot" polling average to capture the effect of wave elections. This latter measure denotes the degree to which the electoral environment is favorable to Republicans or Democrats as a whole.⁶ We also include a binary indicator of whether the legislator faced a quality challenger (that

See the Data and Methods section and the "Dictionary of Effectiveness Language Search Terms by Subcategory" section of the Supplementary Appendix for more information.

⁵ We leverage Volden and Wiseman's raw Legislative Effectiveness Score in this study rather than the benchmarked scores that take into account seniority, committee position, and leadership status, as these are independent predictor variables already included in our analysis.

⁶ For example, the pre-Election Day generic ballot average for the 2018 midterm elections was 49.7 to 42.4 in favor of Democrats, which means a value of 7.3 was assigned to Democratic legislators (and -7.3 for Republicans) for all newsletters within the 2018 election cycle.

is, one with prior elected experience) or opposition in their party primary in the most recent election (Hunt 2022). For all of these measures of electoral security, we expect that more vulnerable legislators (i.e., those who were elected with a smaller margin of the vote, whose party is out of favor, or who face significant primary or general election challenges that cycle) will talk more about all dimensions of effectiveness in their newsletters. Finally, we include a dummy variable indicating whether it is an election year, since legislators should be expected to talk more about their overall effectiveness in years when they are up for election; although, there is often less legislative activity in election years as members of Congress focus on campaigning, which should diminish members' discussion of their legislative effectiveness in particular. We also consider the composition of the district as legislators may try to anticipate what their constituents want to hear about. In particular, we anticipate that legislators representing highly educated districts will talk more about effectiveness because their constituents are more attentive and informed about politics. We also expect that legislators who represent less wealthy districts will emphasize their effectiveness as district advocates (e.g., Mayhew 1974). Here, we leverage American Community Survey estimates of the percent of the district with a bachelor's degree, and the district median income, respectively.

Third, we argue that legislators' institutional position shapes their choices about communicating effectiveness to their constituents. We include several legislator-level institutional factors likely to affect legislators' communications, including whether they are the chair or ranking member of a congressional committee; whether they are currently in the majority or the minority; whether they are a party leader in the chamber (Speaker, majority/minority leader, whip, etc.); their length of tenure; and whether the legislator is retiring at the end of the current session. These institutional factors speak to the variance of opportunities and powers individual members have to be effective within the chamber (Volden and Wiseman 2017). For instance, committee chairs and party leaders thus have more lawmaking effectiveness they can advertise to constituents.

We also include institutional factors that have been shown to matter for members' ability to influence the agenda via their party allegiance. For example, majority-party members naturally have clearer paths to being effective lawmakers, particularly when the president shares their party label (we also include this latter factor as an interactive indicator variable). In this situation, majority party legislators not only reap the benefits of their leaders controlling the legislative agenda, but there is the added benefit of (mostly) shared preferences with the White House. Conversely, members in the minority party are incentivized to cast doubt and blame on the majority's lawmaking activities (Lee 2016), and thus may engage in effectiveness language focused on advocacy and district work. Controlling for institutional position, we expect that more senior legislators have already developed strong reputations in their district that have led their constituents to reelect them repeatedly, and thus they will advertise their effectiveness less frequently. In contrast, junior legislators are still building their reputations, and establishing their effectiveness in all domains will be more central to their communications. Lastly, we consider whether a legislator is retiring from office and expect that outgoing legislators will generally communicate less about their effectiveness to their constituents because they are not seeking reelection.

Data and Methods

To empirically capture how legislators highlight their representational effectiveness and test these hypothesized relationships, we examine all email newsletters sent by House members between 2009 and 2021 as part of the *DC Inbox* data project collected by Cormack (2021). This dataset of newsletters (N=88,061) constitutes the entire cross-section of sitting members of the House during those years. It is important to note the difference between these email newsletters and other types of communications legislators share with their constituents. These e-newsletters are crucially different from campaign emails that a member's campaign organization sends out to supporters. They are

instead closest in comparison to the physical newsletters legislators send out to constituents via franked mail. Communications sent out in this official capacity are subject to a number of restrictions: for example, legislators are forbidden from soliciting campaign donations or making explicit campaign requests (i.e. “Make sure you vote for me on November 4th”). Instead, newsletters and franked mail to constituents are intended to inform constituents about legislators’ activities in their official capacity as a representative both at home and in Washington.

There is a long literature on congressional correspondence—specifically congressional newsletters—as a valuable way for legislators to shape constituents’ evaluations of the job they are doing (e.g., Cover and Brumberg 1982; Lipinski 2004; Parker and Goodman 2009; Grimmer et al. 2015). Newsletters have even been described as “the best possible sources for understanding the messages that members want to convey to their constituents” (Canon 1999, 215). It is no surprise, then, that newsletters are essential to constituency representation, as well as reflective of legislators’ electoral considerations (e.g., Yiannakis 1982; Canon 1999; Lipinski et al. 2003; Grimmer 2013; Cormack 2016b).

These newsletters are an ideal way of measuring communication for a number of reasons. First, congressional e-newsletters are subscribed to almost uniformly by actual constituents who live in the district as compared to social media messages, which are often targeted towards audiences outside of the district (Ruffini 2020). Additionally, e-newsletters are free of institutional constraints like timing (floor speeches) and monetary constraints (campaign communications), and are subject only to the discretion of the member of Congress. As a result, they are a far more direct measure of a legislators’ individual electoral messaging strategy. Most recently, the Congressional Institute found that email newsletters are far and away the preferred way of reaching constituents for members and their staff (Ruffini 2020). In the study, House staff rank e-newsletters as the “most important communication method with constituents”, above franked mail, social media like Facebook and

Twitter (which in many if not most cases reach audiences outside the district), and even above traditional press or earned media.⁷

Each observation in our dataset is the sum of all e-newsletters sent by a member of the House of Representatives in a given year. The result is more than 3,500 member-year observations over the period from 2009 and 2021.⁸ Not only does this dataset include all legislators who served during this period, but it also captures nearly all possible configurations of party control of government—both Democratic and Republican presidents, paired with both Democratic and Republican control of the House. This is particularly crucial given the procedural powers associated with legislative effectiveness and differential governing incentives that come with majority control over a legislative chamber (Lee 2016).

To develop our lexicon of effectiveness language, we first manually coded a sample of e-newsletters (N=400) that were representative based on year, party, gender, race, and tenure length. This produced a list of clauses and sentences for each newsletter associated with specific actions taken by a legislator signaling effectiveness broadly (including meetings, speeches, position-taking pronouncements, and legislative activity) in their own words. We then used these longer sentences to identify smaller, more generalized phrases that could be applied beyond the coded sample to all

⁷ E-newsletters also ranked among the highest types of constituent communication in terms of how representative the recipients are as a cross-section of their district, and also reach a much more significant volume of constituents compared to other forms of communication; the average office reports reaching about 27,000 constituents with their e-newsletters, with some reaching as many as 100,000. The rate at which these newsletters are opened by recipients are also astronomically high - about 30% - compared to commercial email outreach, which tends to be opened by only about 10% of recipients. Finally, staffers say that e-newsletters create a two-way street of representation, rating e-newsletters at the very top in the amount of positive feedback they generate from constituents.

⁸ We also analyze the data using each individual e-newsletter as the unit of observation, and the results are largely robust (see Appendix Table A3). We contend that the member-year is the more appropriate observation for both theoretical and methodological reasons. First, by focusing on the language communicated through e-newsletters over the course of a year, we recognize that not all legislators send e-newsletters at the same time, with the same frequency, or of the same length; thus, a yearly total smooths out office-to-office variation. Additionally, the member-year unit of analysis better corresponds to annual (or biannual) nature of the explanatory variables, which do not offer variation at the granular level of each newsletter.

newsletters in the dataset.⁹ Our aim was to capture not only explicit references to effectiveness of all three types (i.e. “I am an effective legislator”), but also other words and phrases that are used to convey effectiveness. As Table 1 demonstrates, the presence of these words or phrases indicate the discussion of a topic, issue, or event. For example, a legislator uses the term “I introduced” to refer to a piece of legislation they authored, and they discuss this legislation at some length, including making an argument for it or charting its progress in the legislative process. Thus, although we count this as one observation of legislative effectiveness language, it is indicative of broader discussion to which legislators have devoted time and effort in their communications.

With our list of roughly 200 words and phrases in hand, we sorted this larger dictionary of terms into five new dictionaries of the mutually exclusive subcategories summarized in Table 1.¹⁰ These subcategories aggregate into the three broad effectiveness categories of interest in this analysis: language that captures *Lawmaking Effectiveness* (including both Legislative and Procedural Effectiveness); *Advocacy Effectiveness* (including both Active and Expressive Advocacy); and *District Effectiveness*. Using Stata’s “moss” package, each newsletter was then coded for the number of times each term in each dictionary was present in the text. All newsletters sent by a given legislator in a given year were then summed to create counts for each category and subcategory.¹¹ The result is eight variables (five for the subcategories, and three for the broader categories) that capture the frequency with which legislators use language indicative of different types of effectiveness in their newsletters to constituents in a given year. These count variables serve as the dependent variables for the analysis to follow.

⁹ Both authors did so independently for the purposes of intercoder reliability, then reconciled any differences in suggested terms (there were very few).

¹⁰ The complete dictionaries for these subcategories and their terminologies can be found on page 8 of the Supplementary Appendix.

¹¹ This approach means that an individual newsletter can (and usually does) use more than one type of effectiveness language. Of the ~90,000 newsletters used in this analysis, over a third used effectiveness language from two of the three broader categories; another third used language from all three.

Table 1 - Effectiveness Language Dictionaries and Text Examples

Effectiveness Category/Subcategory	Description	Example Sentence	Resulting Term/Phrase
<i>Lawmaking Effectiveness</i>			
Legislative	References to specific actions in the official legislative process: bill introductions, sponsorships/cosponsorships, amendments, etc.	"Last week, I introduced legislation urging the Senate to quickly take up a bill the House passed to increase sanctions on Iran. "	"I introduced"
Procedural	References to individual actions taken within the institution that aren't strictly legislative; committee actions, hearings, floor speeches, etc.	"Fifteen months have passed since President Trump signed into law the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, which I worked to write as a member of this committee."	"as a member of this committee"
<i>Advocacy Effectiveness</i>			
Active	References to specific actions taken to signal prospective or retrospective position-taking rather than those related to new lawmaking.	"I sent a letter to Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, requesting that she recommend ways we can restore freedom of speech at our public universities."	"sent a letter"
Expressive	References to explicitly expressive position-taking or advertising of issue/ideological views, not accompanied by specific actions	"In Washington, I will continue to address the unique challenges of accessing and delivering rural health care services."	"continue to address"
<i>District Effectiveness</i>			
	References to legislator activity undertaken in the district such as town hall meetings, meetings with constituents, and events attended by the legislator during the district work period	"If you, or someone you know, needs help dealing with the Federal bureaucracy, please let my office know and we'll do our best to help you."	"to help you"

Findings & Discussion

We expect legislators to communicate their effectiveness differently so as to call constituents' attention to the types of effectiveness that are most favorable for that member of Congress in light of their descriptive attributes, institutional attributes, and conditions in their district.

Table 2 offers a descriptive overview of how legislators balance the use of our three types of effectiveness language, as well as the subcategories previously described in Table 1. It is clear that Lawmaking Effectiveness language is used more by legislators than either Advocacy or District Effectiveness. However, it should be noted that Lawmaking Effectiveness language only

characterizes about half of the average legislator’s total yearly references to their effectiveness (84 references on average per year), across all released newsletters, compared to 86 references on average per year for Advocacy and District Effectiveness language combined.¹² Consequently, focusing only on lawmaking effectiveness when examining how legislators communicate with their constituents would miss a substantial proportion of legislators’ communication about their effectiveness as members of Congress.

Table 2 - Descriptive Statistics of Effectiveness Advertising Types

Effectiveness Type	Mean	Median	Std. Deviation
<i>Lawmaking (All)</i>	84	39	150
Legislative	31	15	47
Procedural	53	21	121
<i>Advocacy (All)</i>	54	29	76
Active	41	22	58
Expressive	13	6	21
<i>District</i>	32	15	49
<i>Effectiveness (All Combined)</i>	170	89	244

Next we turn to a more comprehensive examination of the factors that determine how legislators communicate their effectiveness to constituents. We do so using a negative binomial regression count model, which we use to account for dispersion in the dependent variables. We also include as a control the overall number of words in the newsletters sent by the legislator that year, essentially as a denominator for the dependent variable.¹³ Finally, we cluster standard errors by

¹² The proportions of effectiveness language types were consistent when looking at disaggregated newsletter-level data, in addition to the member-year analysis presented in Table 2. The disaggregated figures by newsletter can be found in Appendix Table A1.

¹³ For this reason, we do not include year-level dummy variables or linear time trends in the model: on the whole, legislators send progressively more e-newsletters, and with greater word counts, each passing year as members increased their online presence and technological aptitude and availability for constituents. Additionally, we believe that including time trends in addition to the “election year” dummy variable creates problems of multicollinearity; but the latter variable, we believe, is more theoretically important. Regardless, robustness checks splitting our sample into two time

legislator to account for legislator-specific idiosyncrasies that cannot be explicitly accounted for in the model, and the fact that we have repeated legislator observations across years. Table 3 displays the results from three separate models, each with a different dependent variable capturing the total count of words or phrases indicative of Lawmaking, Advocacy, and District Effectiveness within each e-newsletter in the dataset.

As a whole, we find that personal, constituency, and institutional factors are all predictive of legislators' communication of their representational effectiveness, though in varied ways. Some factors are consistently influential over all types of effectiveness communication: for example, legislators whose party is favored in the national political environment advertise all types of effectiveness more. So too do legislators who represent more highly educated constituents, which reflects the fact that these constituents tend to be more attentive to politics and may require more "stated evidence" of their legislators' effectiveness. Other factors, however, are influential over some types of effectiveness language, but not others. For instance, decisions about communicating lawmaking effectiveness are shaped by a legislator's record and what they are able claim credit for. In contrast, advertising advocacy effectiveness is most affected by legislators' attributes and their electoral considerations. Legislators' decisions to tout their district effectiveness reveals less variation by individual attributes; instead, legislators advertise their district effectiveness more in election years and when their party is in a position of strength, whether due to being in the majority, holding the White House, or enjoying favorable national political conditions.

Taking a closer look at the use of lawmaking effectiveness language (Column 1), the frequency with which legislators communicate their lawmaking effectiveness is shaped primarily by

blocks (2009-2016, and 2017-2021) yielded substantively similar results between them, as did models utilizing fixed-effects by Congress and by calendar year (results for all can be found in the Supplementary Appendix Tables A4-A7. This indicates that linear time, year- and Congress-specific factors, and the particularities of presidential administrations (in this case, Obama and Trump) are not major factors in communication styles beyond what is captured in the other, more precise control variables that have more theoretical support behind their inclusion.

institutional power and electoral incentives. Members tout their lawmaking effectiveness when they are in a position to have more to talk about, and when there is more electoral benefit to be gained by calling constituents' attention to their lawmaking effectiveness. This means that legislators who are advantaged by being in the majority party talk about their lawmaking effectiveness more frequently than their colleagues. Being in the majority gives the legislator's party greater control over the legislative agenda; as a result, the legislator is more likely to discuss their effectiveness in the lawmaking process. We also find that legislators whose party is favored by the broader national political environment advertise their legislative effectiveness more, since these legislators understand their policy priorities to be more popular with the electorate at the time, and as a result choose to "press their advantage." However, there is no evidence that party leaders communicate differently than backbenchers despite the additional legislative tools at their disposal.

**Table 3: Effects on Instances of Effectiveness
Language in Legislator E-Newsletters, 2009-2021**

Member-Year Observations

Dependent Variable	Lawmaking	Advocacy	District
Leg. Effectiveness Score	0.06*** (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
Female	0.01 (0.06)	0.08* (0.05)	0.00 (0.07)
Nonwhite	0.13* (0.09)	0.13** (0.07)	0.19*** (0.08)
Democrat	-0.32*** (0.07)	-0.08* (0.05)	-0.02 (0.07)
Ideological Extremism	-0.06 (0.22)	-0.58*** (0.16)	-0.44*** (0.21)
District Safety	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.01* (0.00)
District % Nonwhite	0.25 (0.20)	0.25* (0.18)	0.30* (0.21)
District Median Income	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
District % Bachelor's Degree	0.90*** (0.20)	1.20*** (0.17)	1.35*** (0.22)
National Pol. Environment	0.01* (0.01)	0.01* (0.01)	0.03*** (0.01)
Challenger Quality	0.11*** (0.05)	0.05* (0.04)	-0.03 (0.05)
Primary Opposition	-0.02 (0.04)	0.03 (0.03)	0.01 (0.04)
Election Year	-0.16*** (0.02)	0.03** (0.02)	0.03** (0.02)
In Majority	0.11*** (0.05)	-0.02 (0.04)	0.11*** (0.05)
Same-Party President	-0.02 (0.07)	-0.15*** (0.06)	-0.23*** (0.08)
<i>Majority X Same-Party Pres.</i>	0.06 (0.06)	0.11*** (0.05)	0.10* (0.07)
Party Leader	0.36 (0.47)	-0.14 (0.21)	0.02 (0.28)
Committee Chair	-0.03 (0.08)	0.04 (0.07)	0.01 (0.11)
Tenure Length	-0.01*** (0.01)	-0.01*** (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.01)
Retiring	0.06 (0.08)	0.06 (0.06)	-0.10 (0.08)
Newsletter Wordcount	0.00*** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)
Constant	2.67*** (0.22)	2.49*** (0.19)	2.01*** (0.24)
Pseudo R-Squared	0.08	0.09	0.08
N	3788	3788	3788

Results found using negative binomial regression; standard errors clustered by legislator

Legislators with records of legislative achievement also have more to talk about when it comes to lawmaking effectiveness. The Volden-Wiseman LES measure is strongly predictive of constituent communication designed to highlight a legislator's lawmaking activity and effectiveness. We generated predicted counts of these instances of advertising on a per-year basis for all observed values of the LES during this more than decade-long period of time. Doing so demonstrates a substantively modest but meaningful increase in this communication as a legislator's LES increases: a one standard deviation increase in legislative effectiveness score (1.29) for the average legislator produces a more than 7 percent increase in the predicted number of references to their lawmaking effectiveness. Thus, legislators defined as "more legislatively effective" by the Volden-Wiseman scores appear to recognize their effectiveness as a crucial part of their representational identity, and talk about this specific kind of lawmaking effectiveness to their constituents.

Although this relationship between a legislator's record of lawmaking activity and communicating their legislative effectiveness to constituents may seem obvious, it suggests several important dynamics. First, it indicates that legislators think that voters care about their record of doing the work of lawmaking in Washington like introducing bills and amendments, cosponsoring legislation, and attending committee hearings. In an era of partisan grandstanding and public cynicism towards Congress, this is notable. Second, it indicates that legislators who do not have as strong a record of effective lawmaking (as captured by the LES) do not tend to bluster and overstate their legislative effectiveness to their constituents. If all legislators talked about legislative effectiveness as a means of pandering to the district, we would see a null relationship; instead, legislators' records shape their decisions to talk about legislative effectiveness to their constituents.

The electoral appeal of presenting oneself as an effective lawmaker is borne out by the evidence that junior legislators, who are still establishing their legislative bonafides, use lawmaking effectiveness language more often than their more senior colleagues. Although Volden and Wiseman

(2014) find that more experienced legislators are more effective lawmakers, we find that these senior legislators are not the ones *talking* about their effectiveness to their constituents. More tenured legislators have an established reputation with their constituents, and perhaps feel they do not need to convince them of their effectiveness. Less experienced lawmakers, meanwhile, may be hustling to appear active and effective, emphasizing their achievements in the area of lawmaking in particular. We also see that non-white legislators talk more about their lawmaking effectiveness, which may reflect a similar perceived need to establish their legislative bonafides. As a group, non-white legislators' historical exclusion and current underrepresentation in positions of political power may mean that these legislators feel a need to talk more about their legislative effectiveness to overcome potential bias and doubts about their abilities.

Consistent with expectations, members who face a high-quality challenger in the general election invoke their lawmaking effectiveness more frequently, since this is a way to remind their constituents of their work in Washington – and it is a tool not available to their challenger. Legislators who faced a primary challenger, however, do not invoke their effectiveness in lawmaking more often, which suggests that intraparty electoral competition is less about effectiveness and perhaps more about ideological positions. The data also reveal that Republicans talk more about their lawmaking effectiveness than Democrats, counter to Republicans' ideological reputation regarding a limited role for the federal government. But this does not mean that Republicans are not legislatively active in Washington. Instead, this finding likely reflects the more oppositional politics of the modern Republican party in Congress, and the use of legislative procedure to obstruct and repeal legislation (e.g., Lee 2016). Congressional Republicans can then point to these actions as part of the argument they make to their more conservative constituents about their value in Washington: that they can successfully stall Democrats' legislative priorities, or repeal previously-passed

Democratic legislation during the Obama years. As a result, Republicans may advertise their varied legislative activities more even if Democrats are more pro-active in passing legislation.

The legislators most likely to communicate their Advocacy Effectiveness to constituents look different than those highlighting their Lawmaking Effectiveness in several key and expected ways. Most notably, members who need to overcome perceived or real disadvantages as lawmakers turn to advocacy when communicating with constituents. Our results indicate that both women and non-white legislators are significantly more likely to highlight advocacy effectiveness, even after controlling for their objective legislative power through institutional position, party status and legislative record. This dynamic is consistent with the notion that women need to talk more about their effectiveness to overcome gendered stereotypes (e.g, Dolan and Kropf 2004; Anzia and Berry 2011; Pearson and Dancey 2011; Cormack 2016b). Similarly, non-white legislators need to talk more about their effectiveness as advocates to counter stereotypes based on race and ethnicity (e.g., Gay 2002; Haynie 2002; Grose 2011). In this way, female and non-white House members portray themselves as active and hard working to demonstrate their effectiveness as representatives and appeal to constituents. For non-white members in particular, this constituent connection is apparent in the finding for district racial composition, which shows districts with more non-white constituents as more likely to receive messages from their representatives related to their effectiveness in advocacy. This rings true with previous work finding that members who represent significant numbers of racial minorities are vocal advocates for these constituents. Meanwhile, district income appears to have no impact on the extent of advocacy effectiveness language members put forward, consistent with Miler's (2018) findings on advocacy for the poor.

A similar logic extends to other types of legislators who are also structurally disadvantaged in the House. More junior legislators mention their advocacy effectiveness more often than their senior colleagues in an effort to establish their reputation as a good representative. Ideologically

moderate legislators who may have limited legislative input in a highly polarized and partisan House, also communicate their advocacy effectiveness more frequently than their more liberal and conservative colleagues. This communication style also highlights their unique reputations as pragmatic lawmakers working to get things done in Congress.

Another type of structural disadvantage in Congress comes from being in the party that does not control the White House, nor the national messaging. Unlike our finding for lawmaking effectiveness, majority status does not appear to have any consistent effect on how much legislators communicate their bonafides as advocates. Instead, presidential politics play a key role. As we see in Figure 1, legislators of the opposing party to the president are more likely to invoke their advocacy effectiveness than members of the president's party regardless of their own party status in the House. This positioning allows them to convey their opposition to the president's positions and reflects their inability to enact new laws. In the face of a presidential veto, out-of-power legislators may make their advocacy effectiveness more salient and central to the reputation they burnish to their constituents via their communications. Thus, these results suggest that legislators recognize that communicating their effectiveness as advocates and fighters may be the most valuable strategy in the absence of institutional legislative power.

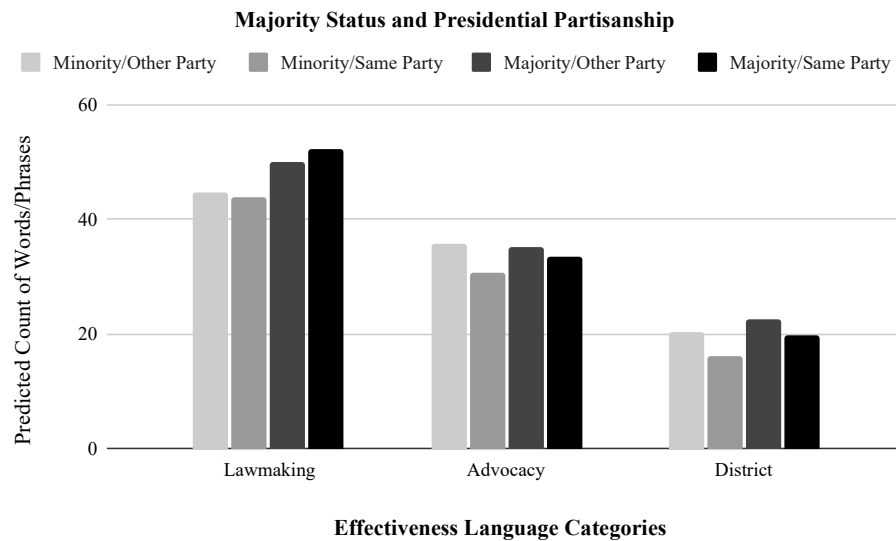


Figure 1: Predicted impact of majority status and presidential partisanship on usage of effectiveness language. Estimates generated from the negative binomial count models found in Table 3.

When it comes to talking about their effectiveness on behalf of the district, including holding town hall meetings, coffee chats with constituents, attending local events, or offering assistance navigating the federal government, legislators of many stripes tout themselves as effectively positioned to help their constituents. But we also see that institutional position and electoral incentives shape these communication choices (Table 3, column 3). As with lawmaking effectiveness, legislators who are in the majority likely find it much easier to claim responsibility for funds and service brought to the district, and may do more to advertise events and opportunities in the district related to the majority party’s policy agenda. Notably, having an opposite-party president also appears to increase advertising of district activity, which likely reflects the out-party’s oppositional role. For example, legislators may talk about district events designed to highlight their opposition to the president’s agenda, as illustrated by Republican lawmakers holding district events

opposing healthcare reform during the Obama administration or Democratic lawmakers at events opposing immigration policy during the Trump administration.

Legislators also have strong electoral incentives to talk about their effectiveness in the district and to let constituents know of their unique value, and implicitly of the reason to reelect them. Indeed, we see that legislators talk more about their effectiveness in the district during election years, indicating the importance they believe constituents ascribe to this part of their jobs as representatives. In addition, there is modest evidence that legislators who are electorally vulnerable advertise their district effectiveness more as a way of reminding constituents of the ways in which they serve the district and their value in this role. We see a similar dynamic reflected in the negative relationship between seniority and district effectiveness language. This dynamic reveals how long-standing incumbents are advantaged as representatives since their established reputations reduce the need to convince their constituents of their effectiveness in the job. Table 3 also shows that district effectiveness language is used more by moderate legislators for whom the inherently less partisan nature of district service is likely an appealing alternative to tout to their constituents as compared to the more partisan nature of Hill-based activity.

As noted, talking about district effectiveness to constituents is widely appealing to legislators, with both Republicans and Democrats using this language with similar frequency in their communications. Similarly, there is no evidence that legislators' gender affects how they communicate their district effectiveness. However, the data show again that non-white legislators tout their district effectiveness to their constituents more than their white colleagues. The consistency of this dynamic across the three forms of effectiveness is striking and provides compelling evidence of non-white legislators' belief that they have to actively overcome perceptions that they are less effective legislators by communicating their legislative, advocacy, and district effectiveness to their constituents. The fact that many (although not all) non-white legislators

represent majority non-white districts coupled with the finding that legislators who represent districts with a greater percentage of non-white constituents talk more about district effectiveness also indicates important dynamics of descriptive representation. We posit that these findings may be a result of the unique connections that non-white legislators share with their constituents that require more particularized types of representation that do not always fit a nationalized narrative. Fenno (2003), for example, observes Black representatives providing consistent district-based representation to their constituents by tapping into what Dawson (1994) and others have termed “linked fate.” And regardless of the legislator’s race, more recent work has shown that more racially diverse districts have distinct preferences for constituent service (Harden 2015), thus incentivizing representatives of these districts to emphasize it in their communications.

Taken together, the results of our analyses of nearly 90,000 e-newsletters from legislators to their constituents reveal that legislators do talk about their effectiveness, and that they do so in three distinct categories: lawmaking, advocacy, and district service. However, not all legislators talk about effectiveness in the same way or for the same reasons. Legislators vary significantly in their individual traits and backgrounds; their institutional powers and positioning; and the conditions of their own districts. We find consistent evidence that these factors motivate legislators to use effectiveness language to underscore their strengths – often defined as advantages in their partisan position or favorable electoral conditions – and to compensate for institutional disadvantages beyond their control, as is the case with junior, female, and non-white legislators.

Conclusion

This paper expands our understanding of what it means to be effective in the complex and multifaceted job of a member of Congress. Constituents expect members to be not only effective lawmakers, but also effective advocates and district representatives. Having put forth this more

comprehensive theory of what being an effective member of Congress entails, we show how legislators actively present these types of effectiveness in their constituent communications. Using new text-based methods and extensive data, we find that although legislators are eager to communicate their legislative prowess and effort to their constituents, it is far from the only way they communicate their broader effectiveness as a representative. We demonstrate the presence of three distinct types of effectiveness that legislators emphasize in their constituent communications: Lawmaking Effectiveness, which indicates direct legislative and procedural Hill action; Advocacy Effectiveness, which captures pronouncements and active position-taking done by legislators to demonstrate that they are effective advocates; and District Effectiveness, which captures direct action taken within the district in areas like casework, constituent meetings, and other local interactions.

Examining the text of nearly 90,000 constituent e-newsletters from 2009-2021, it is evident that personal, constituency, and institutional factors all shape the extent to which legislators communicate their own effectiveness, although the impacts of these factors are not uniform. Some representational effectiveness language, such as Lawmaking Effectiveness, is clearly more prominent among legislators who are in stronger institutional positions, and who are more demonstrably effective based on recorded actions undertaken on the Hill, as captured by their LES. In contrast, electoral politics play a more varied role, suggesting that legislators' representational "styles" of communicating their effectiveness are shaped by both the national political landscape and the particulars of legislators' races. Lastly, there is variation in how different types of legislators communicate different types of effectiveness to their constituents. Specifically, non-white legislators who have traditionally been excluded from institutional power, and who remain underrepresented in Congress, tend to communicate their effectiveness more than their white colleagues, likely as an effort to counter potential biases in voters' assumptions about their effectiveness. When it comes to

gender, there are no notable differences in how men and women tout their lawmaking effectiveness and district effectiveness; however, women legislators have a notably higher propensity to communicate their advocacy effectiveness to constituents. In terms of party affiliation, we find that Republicans are more likely to tout their lawmaking effectiveness in particular, with weak or null relationships between party and advocacy or district effectiveness. Lastly, given high levels of polarization, moderate legislators use communications to tout their effectiveness and assure voters that they are working for the district despite the partisan environment.

Legislators' choices to communicate their effectiveness matter to the study of congressional representation. Given voters' well-established lack of knowledge about the lawmaking process in Washington, legislators have an opportunity to shape what their constituents know about how well they do their job. Opportunities to directly communicate with constituents, such as through district newsletters, allow the legislator to cut through the din of nationalized political news and instead emphasize their own effectiveness as a legislator, advocate, and district servant.

Being an effective representative amounts to more than introducing a great deal of legislation or having that legislation be successful. Although this is an important component of representation in Congress, it is only one piece of the puzzle of representation faced by members. Effective representation is multidimensional, encompassing concrete institutionally-sanctioned legislative activities, as well as active and expressive advocacy, which lets voters know that a legislator is fighting for their district while they are on the Hill. Legislators also actively communicate their actions in the district that demonstrate their quality and effort as a representative of their particular district. Advertising one type of effectiveness is not mutually exclusive with another. In fact, the vast majority of member newsletters contained instances of at least two different types of effectiveness language. The multidimensional nature of representational effectiveness provides legislators flexibility in their constituent communications. For example, a legislator lacking either

credentials or institutional tools conducive to lawmaking effectiveness can still please their constituents by turning to other actions they are taking in the district, or in direct advocacy for or against issues their district cares about.

On a normative level, recognizing a broader framework of representational effectiveness is important for a number of reasons. Institutional trust in Congress has persistently rested at or near an all-time low in recent years. Although Congress itself may remain mired in legislative gridlock and vitriolic partisan infighting, individual legislators can communicate their own individual efforts to constituents, increase their voters' confidence in their home representative, and perhaps improve confidence in Congress on the whole. More broadly, this alternative framework of representational effectiveness can help us reconsider what Congress's role really is. Although legislative achievement is and will remain a key metric of success in Congress (both for the institution and the individual legislator), voters feel well-represented by actions and pronouncements made by individual legislators that do not require concrete lawmaking activity. If legislators can actively shape the criteria by which their constituents evaluate their performance—and if that performance need not depend on legislative achievement to be successful—it is crucial to understand these alternative representational methods.

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