



## **Highlights from the 2023-2024 Wisconsin Legislature Legislative Effectiveness Scores**

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### **Executive Summary**

The Center for Effective Lawmaking (CEL) is pleased to announce the release of the State Legislative Effectiveness Scores (SLES) for the recently completed 2023-2024 Wisconsin Legislature legislative session. This report offers highlights from our initial analyses of these scores, including:

- We identify the top-10 most effective lawmakers in each party in the State Assembly, along with the top-10 most effective lawmakers in the Republican Party, and the top-5 most effective Democratic lawmakers in the State Senate. Many lawmakers continued their patterns of highly effective lawmaking from the previous legislative sessions.
- We identify those lawmakers with the longest streaks of being in our prestigious “Above Expectations” category, as well as first-term lawmakers in this category.
- We find that, consistent with our published research findings, there is an overall lawmaking benefit from being in the majority party. Indeed, over the past three legislative terms, Democrats have been almost entirely shut out of the lawmaking process in Wisconsin. Over that time period, only 10 bills sponsored by minority-party Democrats became law, compared to 638 from majority-party Republicans.
- Across both chambers, serving as a committee chair is related to greater lawmaking effectiveness. In addition, lawmaking effectiveness is a consistent trait among legislators, with several legislators appearing among the top-10 most effective lawmakers for both the 2023-2024 and 2021-2022 legislative sessions.

### **Introduction and Methodology**

The State Legislative Effectiveness Scores discussed here are based on the combination of fifteen metrics capturing the bills that each member of each state legislature sponsors, how far their bills move through the lawmaking process, and how substantial their policy proposals are. The scores are normalized to an average value of 1.0 in both the State Assembly and the State Senate in each legislative session. More on our [methodology](#) and [scores](#) can be found at our website.

For each member of the State Assembly and State Senate, we also identify a Benchmark Score based on the average lawmaking effectiveness of legislators who share that legislator’s majority- or minority-party status, level of seniority, and chair position on a committee. Controlling for these considerations is important in order to describe legislators on a more level playing field. For example, in the 2023-2024 Wisconsin State Assembly, minority-party lawmakers had an average SLES of 0.38, compared to 1.34 for majority-party members, while committee chairs had an average SLES of 1.49. In the State Senate, those averages were 0.30 in the minority party, 1.35 in the majority party, and 1.41 among committee chairs.

We then label each lawmaker as “Above Expectations” for those outperforming their benchmark scores by 50% or more, “Below Expectations” for those below 50% of their benchmark, and “Meeting Expectations” for all other legislators.

Finally, within each party, we rank each member according to their SLES. This ranking is used to generate the Top Ten lists highlighted in the tables below. Given the substantial lawmaking benefit that follows from being in the majority party, ranking the entire Wisconsin State Legislature together would be inappropriate, but these comparisons within each party are quite informative.

**Highly Effective Republican Lawmakers in the 2023-2024 Wisconsin State Assembly**

The following table identifies the ten highest-scoring Republicans in the 2023-2024 State Assembly. Eight of the top ten were committee chairs.

**Top Ten List—House Republicans (2023-2024 Legislative Session)**

	<u>Name</u>	<u>LES</u>	<u>Committee Chair</u>
<b>1.</b>	<b>Shae Sortwell (District 2)</b>	4.23	Chair
<b>2.</b>	<b>Joel Kitchens (District 1)</b>	3.01	Chair
<b>3.</b>	<b>Loren Oldenburg (District 96)</b>	2.79	Chair
<b>4.</b>	<b>Robert Wittke (District 62)</b>	2.76	Chair
<b>5.</b>	<b>Patrick Snyder (District 85)</b>	2.70	Chair
<b>6.</b>	<b>William Penterman (District 37)</b>	2.50	Chair
<b>7.</b>	<b>Bob Donovan (District 84)</b>	2.50	None
<b>8.</b>	<b>Barbara Dittrich (District 38)</b>	2.45	Chair
<b>9.</b>	<b>Ron Tusler (District 3)</b>	2.31	Chair
<b>10.</b>	<b>Joy Goeben (District 5)</b>	2.26	None

At the top of the list is Representative Shae Sortwell from District 2 (Manitowoc, Brown, and Outagamie counties) with a score of 4.23. In the 2023-2024 legislative session, he introduced 51 bills, 46 received action in committee, 18 received action beyond committee, 6 passed the State Assembly, and 3 became law. He has served in the Wisconsin State Assembly since 2019. He received his bachelor’s degree in public administration and political science from the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay. After graduation, he served for nine years in the US Army Reserve while

also becoming active in local politics, where he won his election to the Green Bay city council and worked as a legislative aide to State Representative Chad Weininger. Two Republican Representatives on our current list were also among the top-10 highest scores in the 2021-2022 legislative session: Representative Robert Wittke (District 62), and Representative Shae Sortwell (District 2).

**Highly Effective Democratic Lawmakers in the 2023-2024 Wisconsin State Assembly**

The following table identifies the top ten highest-scorers in the 2023-2024 State Assembly among minority-party Democrats.

**Top Ten List—House Democrats (2023-2024 Legislative Session)**

	<u>Name</u>	<u>LES</u>	<u>Seniority</u>
1.	<b>Jimmy Anderson (District 47)</b>	0.99	4
2.	<b>Kristina Shelton (District 90)</b>	0.96	2
3.	<b>Shelia Stubbs (District 77)</b>	0.88	3
4.	<b>Katrina Shankland (District 71)</b>	0.82	6
5.	<b>Lisa Subeck (District 78)</b>	0.80	5
6.	<b>Sylvia Ortiz-Velez (District 8)</b>	0.79	2
7.	<b>Darrin Madison (District 10)</b>	0.66	1
8.	<b>Alex Joers (District 79)</b>	0.66	1
9.	<b>Jill Billings (District 95)</b>	0.64	7
10.	<b>Robyn Vining (District 14)</b>	0.58	3

Topping our list is Representative Jimmy Anderson of District 47 (Dane County), with a State Legislative Effectiveness Score of 0.99. He introduced 42 bills in the 2023-2024 legislative session, 14 of which received action in committee. He received his B.A. from California State University and his J.D. from the University of Wisconsin Law School. Prior to running for office, he was a victim in a drunk driving incident. His experience with the healthcare system led him to run for the State Assembly in 2017, which he served in until 2025.

Four Democratic Representatives on our current list were also among the top-10 highest scores in the 2021-2022 legislative session: Representative Lisa Subeck (District 78), Representative Shelia Stubbs (District 77), Representative Katrina Shankland (District 71), Representative Robyn Vining (District 14), and Representative Kristina Shelton (District 90).

**Highly Effective Republican Lawmakers in the 2023-2024 State Senate**

**Top Ten List—Senate Republicans (2023-2024 Legislative Session)**

	<u>Name</u>	<u>LES</u>	<u>Committee Chair</u>
1.	<b>Jesse James (District 23)</b>	3.11	Chair
2.	<b>Joan Ballweg (District 14)</b>	2.44	Chair

<b>3.</b>	<b>Rob Stafsholt (District 10)</b>	2.03	Chair
<b>4.</b>	<b>Andre Jacque (District 1)</b>	1.94	Chair
<b>5.</b>	<b>Romaine Quinn (District 25)</b>	1.87	Chair
<b>6.</b>	<b>Patrick Testin (District 24)</b>	1.85	Chair
<b>7.</b>	<b>Rachael Cabral-Guevara (District 19)</b>	1.84	Chair
<b>8.</b>	<b>Howard Marklein (District 17)</b>	1.77	Chair
<b>9.</b>	<b>Van Wanggaard (District 21)</b>	1.71	Chair
<b>10.</b>	<b>Robert Cowles (District 2)</b>	1.63	Chair

Among Republicans in the State Senate, Sen. Jesse James from District 23 (Barron, Clark, Price, Rusk, Taylor, Chippewa, Dunn, Marathon counties) was ranked first in terms of his SLES score, with a score of 3.11. In the 2023-2024 session, he introduced 83 bills, 72 received action in committee, 42 received action beyond committee, 21 passed the Senate, and 17 became law. He has represented the 23<sup>rd</sup> District in the State Senate since 2023. Prior to being elected to the State Senate, he served in the State Assembly from 2019 to 2023. He graduated from Chippewa Valley Technical College, served in the US Army for six years, and currently works as a police officer.

In the 2023-2024 legislative session, we also find that all of the top-10 Republican State Senators are also committee chairs.

Six Senators on the list were also among the top-10 highest scoring Republicans in the 2021-2022 legislative session. These Senators are Sen. Joan Ballweg (District 14), Sen. Andre Jacque (District 1), Sen. Patrick Testin (District 24), Sen. Howard Marklein (District 17), Sen. Van Wanggaard (District 21), and Sen. Robert Cowles (District 2).

### Highly Effective Democratic Lawmakers in the 2023-2024 State Senate

#### Top Five List—Senate Democrats (2023-2024 Legislative Session)

	<u>Name</u>	<u>LES</u>	<u>Seniority</u>
<b>1.</b>	<b>Christopher Larson (District 7)</b>	0.71	7
<b>2.</b>	<b>Jeff Smith (District 31)</b>	0.51	3
<b>3.</b>	<b>Kelda Roys (District 26)</b>	0.39	2
<b>4.</b>	<b>LaTonya Johnson (District 6)</b>	0.38	4
<b>5.</b>	<b>Melissa Agard (District 16)</b>	0.33	1

Sen. Christopher Larson from District 7 (Milwaukee County) had the highest SLES for Senate Democrats in the 2023-2024 legislative session, with a score of 0.71. He introduced 74 bills, 32 of which received action in committee. Sen. Larson has been representing the 7<sup>th</sup> District since 2013. He earned a bachelor's degree in finance from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and was

in business before entering politics. He was the Senate Minority Leader from 2013 to 2014 and is currently the Senate Democratic caucus chair.

Turning to the Democratic Senators in the 2023-2024 legislative session, we find that there is substantial overlap between the highest performers on the top-5 list of Democratic Senators for the 2023-2024 legislative session and the preceding top-5 list for Democratic legislators in the 2021-2022 legislative session, with Senator Jeff Smith (District 31), Senator Christopher Larson (District 7), and Senator LaTonya Johnson (District 6) appearing on both lists.

### **Lawmakers with Long-Standing Patterns of “Above Expectations”**

Those who significantly exceed their benchmark score (which is calculated based on their seniority and status as a majority party member and/or committee chairperson) are identified as being in our “Above Expectations” category. The lists below identify the Representatives and Senators with the longest active streaks of exceeding expectations in consecutive sessions continuing through (and including) the 2023-2024 legislative session.

#### **State Representatives with Longest Streak of “Above Expectations” (through the 2023-2024 Legislative Session)**

	<u>Name</u>	<u>Streak</u>	<u>SLES (2023-2024)</u>	<u>Seniority</u>
1.	<b>Katrina Shankland (D-71)</b>	4 Legislative Sessions	0.82	6 Legislative Sessions
2.	<b>Lisa Subeck (D-78)</b>	4 Legislative Sessions	0.80	5 Legislative Sessions

Representative Katrina Shankland (D) of District 71 (Portage and Adams counties) had the longest streak of “Above Expectations,” 4 legislative sessions, with a SLES score in the most recent legislative session of 0.82. Representative Shankland was elected to the Wisconsin State Assembly in 2013 and served until 2025. During the 2023-2024 legislative session, she introduced 33 bills, 13 of which received action in committee. She received a B.A. in political science and Latin American studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and earned her master’s degree from the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. Before entering politics, she worked as a coordinator for the Midwest Renewable Energy Association and became a community organizer for the Democratic Party of Wisconsin.

#### **State Senators with Longest Streak of “Above Expectations” (through the 2023-2024 Legislative Session)**

	<u>Name</u>	<u>Streak</u>	<u>SLES (2023-2024)</u>	<u>Seniority</u>
1.	<b>Christopher Larson (D-7)</b>	3 Legislative Sessions	0.71	7 Legislative Sessions
2.	<b>Jeff Smith (D-31)</b>	3 Legislative Sessions	0.52	3 Legislative Session

Turning to the State Senate, Senator Christopher Larson (D) of District 7 (Milwaukee County) exceeded expectations for 3 consecutive legislative sessions.

### High-Performing Freshmen

One way to identify future legislative leaders is to identify freshman Representatives and Senators who earned an “Above Expectations” rating in their first term. For freshman legislators, their initial scores are compared to benchmarks for newcomers—so when a freshman outperforms their cohort, it can reveal strong political acumen, the ability to navigate legislative procedures quickly, and skill in coalition-building or policy entrepreneurship. These traits often correlate with future leadership roles. Our research on the U.S. Congress suggests that legislators who perform well early on are more likely to be selected for committee chairs or leadership positions, and influence major legislation in subsequent terms. Hence, identifying high-performing freshmen can offer early signals of who might rise through the ranks.

### Freshmen Representatives “Above Expectations” (2023-2024 Legislative Session)

	<u>Name</u>	<u>SLES (2023-2024)</u>
1.	Bob Donovan (R-84)	2.50
2.	Joy Goeben (R-5)	2.26
3.	Ellen Schutt (R-31)	2.17
4.	Nik Rettinger (R-83)	2.16
5.	Amy Binsfeld (R-27)	2.13
6.	Nate Gustafson (R-55)	2.13
7.	Amanda Nedweski (R-61)	2.03
8.	Jerry O’Connor (R-52)	1.98
9.	Chanz Green (R-74)	1.82
10.	Darrin Madison (D-10)	0.66
11.	Alex Joers (D-79)	0.66

The State Representative with the highest “Above Expectation” score during his freshman term was Representative Bob Donovan (Waukesha and Racine counties) with a score of 2.50. He was elected in 2023. Before politics, he worked as a plant foreman at a coal processing plant. During the 2023-2024 legislative session, he introduced 13 bills, 9 of which received action in committee, 8 received action beyond committee, 4 of which passed the House, and 3 of his sponsored bills became law.

### Freshmen Senators “Above Expectations” (2023-2024 Legislative Session)

	<u>Name</u>	<u>SLES (2023-2024)</u>
1.	Jesse James (R-23)	3.11

The top-performing freshman in the State Senate was Senator Jesse James (R) from District 23 (Barron, Clark, Price, Rusk, Taylor, Chippewa, Dunn, Marathon counties), with a SLES score of 1.60, ranking him first overall among Republican Senators in the 2023-2024 legislative session.

### **Other Findings**

In terms of broader patterns, it is difficult to over-state the degree to which minority-party lawmakers are shut out of the lawmaking process in Wisconsin. While the SLES of minority-party lawmakers across the country on the whole averages about 0.6, the scores for minority-party members in Wisconsin have been around half of that, averaging around 0.3, and their successes are mostly limited to early lawmaking stages.

Indeed, combining the last three legislative terms together – across both the Assembly and the Senate – the number of laws sponsored by Democrats totals just ten, compared to 638 coming from Republicans. This ratio is significantly out of proportion to the number of seats the parties hold in the chambers, and well beyond what is seen in most legislatures across the country.

### **Conclusion**

The 2023-2024 Wisconsin legislative session demonstrated consistent patterns in legislative effectiveness, with experienced legislators, committee chairs, and majority-party members continuing to hold a distinct advantage in advancing their policy agendas. Across both chambers, many of the most effective lawmakers continued their high performance from previous sessions, indicating a durable capacity for lawmaking among key figures. These findings underscore the importance of institutional positions and experiences in shaping legislative outcomes in Wisconsin.