

# Being An **Effective Lawmaker** From Day One

A guide for new state legislators from the Center for Effective Lawmaking



Center for  
**Effective Lawmaking**



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# Welcome

Congratulations from the Center for Effective Lawmaking (CEL)! You have recently been elected to your state legislature, and you are joining a long and distinguished tradition of men and women who have served their communities and their states in America's most important democratic institutions.

You have arrived with your own top policy priorities. But what can you do to achieve your goals? How can you become successful at advancing your legislative agenda through the different stages of the lawmaking process, from bill introduction to becoming a new law? How do you become an effective lawmaker?

In this guide we present lessons learned from the analysis of decades of data on the legislative activities of state legislators across the country, as well as from conversations with effective lawmakers from across the nation. We took the advice that new members typically receive and put it to the test, exploring what happened to the legislative proposals of those who followed it and those who did not. Based on the CEL's State Legislative Effectiveness Scores, we find that some of that advice is extremely valuable, while other suggestions seem to make little difference whatsoever.

State legislatures vary enormously. Some meet year-round and have professional staff and substantial resources; others convene for only a few months and have little institutional support for their members. Some chambers are large and highly structured; others are small and informal. Leadership power, committee influence, and the role of party all differ significantly from state to state. The advice in this guide is grounded in research findings and conversations with effective lawmakers from across the country, and we believe it offers broadly applicable lessons. That said, which pieces of advice are most valuable to you will depend on your own state's institutions, norms, and political conditions, and we encourage you to read our guide with that context in mind.



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## HOW DO WE KNOW?

### ***Defining and Measuring Legislative Effectiveness***

State legislators engage in many valuable activities on behalf of their constituents. They hold hearings, communicate with the public, assist constituents with government services, and cast votes on the floor. While all of these activities matter, our definition of legislative effectiveness focuses on one thing: the proven ability of a legislator to advance his or her sponsored bills through the lawmaking process and into law.

To measure this activity, the Center for Effective Lawmaking has developed State Legislative Effectiveness Scores (SLES) for legislators across all 99 legislative chambers, covering all 50 states.\* These scores span more than a thousand legislative sessions from the late 1980s through the most recently completed legislative term in each state, based on the coding and classification of millions of bills drawn from publicly available state legislative websites and archives.

*\*Bucchianeri, Peter, Craig Volden, and Alan E. Wiseman. 2025. "Legislative Effectiveness in the American States." American Political Science Review 119(1): 21–39.*



For each bill introduced by a state legislator, we track whether it received any action in committee, any action beyond committee, whether it passed its home chamber, and whether it became law. Bills are weighted by their substantive importance: commemorative bills receive the least weight, substantive bills receive five times as much weight, and the most significant bills receive ten times as much weight as commemorative bills. A legislator's score reflects his or her share of all lawmaking activity in the chamber during a given legislative term, normalized so that the average score equals 1 in each chamber in each term. This normalization allows for meaningful comparisons among legislators within the same chamber, and across chambers and states, when examining the effects of factors like seniority, party status, or institutional design.

As in Congress, we find that majority-party legislators, committee chairs, and more senior members tend to be more effective lawmakers than their minority-party, rank-and-file, and freshman counterparts. These patterns hold across a wide range of state legislative settings, offering a reliable foundation from which to explore how newly elected members can hit the ground running toward becoming highly effective lawmakers.

To learn more about our methodology, as well as to see State Legislative Effectiveness Scores for legislators in your state, visit [thelawmakers.org/find-representatives](https://thelawmakers.org/find-representatives).



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WI → Lower Chamber → 2023-2024

100 Legislators R: 65 D: 35

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TERM

2023-2024

CHAMBER

Lower

Upper

| Name ↑↓            | Party | District ↑↓ | Party Rank ↑↓ | Benchmark | SLES ↓ |   |
|--------------------|-------|-------------|---------------|-----------|--------|---|
| Republican         |       |             |               |           |        |   |
| Sortwell, Shae     | R     | 2           | 1/65          | 1.468     | 4.227  | > |
| Kitchens, Joel     | R     | 1           | 2/65          | 1.468     | 3.006  | > |
| Oldenburg, Loren   | R     | 96          | 3/65          | 1.468     | 2.793  | > |
| Wittke, Robert     | R     | 62          | 4/65          | 1.468     | 2.763  | > |
| Snyder, Patrick    | R     | 85          | 5/65          | 1.468     | 2.699  | > |
| Penterman, William | R     | 37          | 6/65          | 1.468     | 2.503  | > |
| Donovan, Bob       | R     | 84          | 7/65          | 1.178     | 2.498  | > |
| Dittrich, Barbara  | R     | 38          | 8/65          | 1.468     | 2.447  | > |
| Tusler, Ron        | R     | 3           | 9/65          | 1.468     | 2.307  | > |
| Goeben, Joy        | R     | 5           | 10/65         | 1.178     | 2.259  | > |
| Steffen, David     | R     | 4           | 11/65         | 1.468     | 2.219  | > |
| Krug, Scott        | R     | 72          | 12/65         | 1.468     | 2.217  | > |

## Pop Quiz

Based on research from the Center for Effective Lawmaking, are the following statements True or False?

1. The most effective state lawmakers introduce bills across a wide range of policy areas, demonstrating their versatility and broad engagement with constituent needs. **T / F**
2. For new state legislators, the professional expertise they bring from their careers before the legislature is often more valuable in their early lawmaking than the institutional advantages they have yet to accumulate. **T / F**
3. Legislators who align their committee assignments with their policy priorities tend to be more effective lawmakers than those who pursue bills largely outside their committee jurisdiction. **T / F**
4. Because state legislatures vary so much in size, resources, and political culture, new legislators are better off developing original policy solutions than looking to what has worked in other states. **T / F**
5. In states where professional legislative staff resources are limited, new lawmakers have few reliable sources of policy expertise to draw on when developing their legislation. **T / F**
6. Even highly effective state lawmakers rarely see their priority bills advance into law within their first term or two — persistence across multiple sessions is usually required. **T / F**
7. Lawmakers who mainly attract cosponsors from their own party are more effective than bipartisan lawmakers, especially in today's polarized political environment. **T / F**
8. Because each chamber operates independently, the most effective lawmakers concentrate their coalition-building within their own chamber and leave to others the work of securing support in the other chamber and the governor's office. **T / F**

## SEEKING ANSWERS TO THESE IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

Newly elected members of state legislatures often receive orientation materials from a range of organizations, both from within their legislature and beyond. Based on our analyses, some pieces of advice for new legislators prove valuable while others appear to make little difference as to whether they are successful in advancing their bills through the legislative process. The questions on the previous page engage with many aspects of the work that a newly elected member needs to address quickly: how to focus your agenda, how to engage with members of your own party as well as members of the opposing party, and how to position yourself within the chamber in terms of committee assignments.

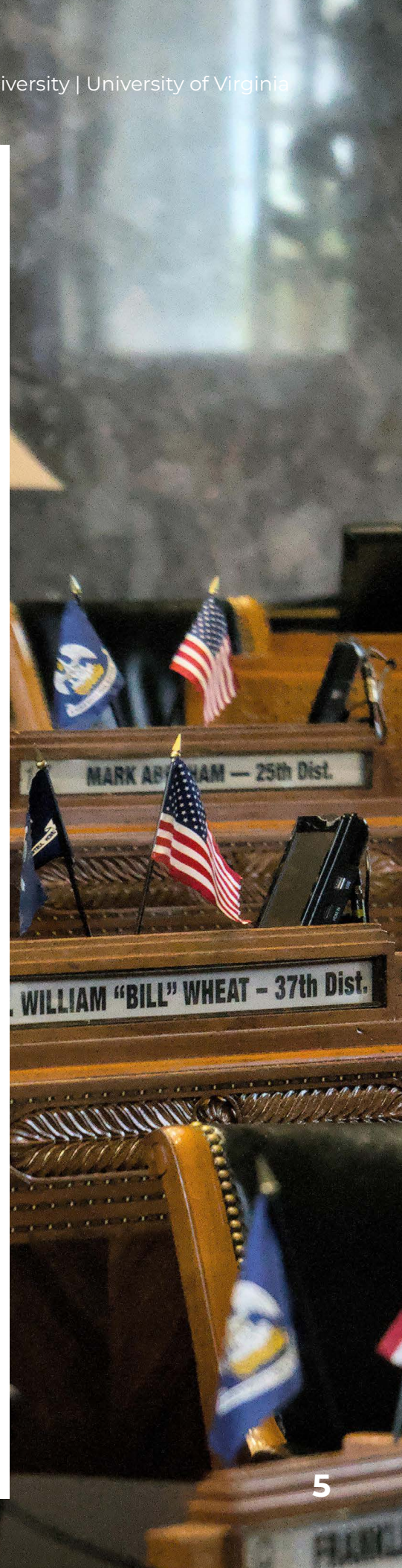
We seek to answer these questions by drawing on lessons from our research on state legislative effectiveness, as presented in peer-reviewed academic publications, publicly circulated working papers, and our ongoing analyses, all of which can be found at [thelawmakers.org](https://thelawmakers.org). What makes this research distinctive is that it goes beyond conventional wisdom and anecdote. Rather than simply asking what legislators believe works, we test those beliefs against decades of data, tracking the actual fates of bills introduced across the states to identify which strategies consistently produce results and which do not.\*

We also draw on conversations with highly effective state lawmakers from across the country.\*\* Our research and those conversations point to two broad categories of activities that legislators might engage in if they want to be effective lawmakers.

**First, they must DEFINE their lawmaking agenda. Then, they must ENGAGE their lawmaking partners.**

*\*Bucchianeri, Peter, Craig Volden, and Alan E. Wiseman. 2025. "Legislative Effectiveness in the American States." American Political Science Review 119(1): 21–39.*

*\*\*[thelawmakers.org/category/conversations-with-lawmakers](https://thelawmakers.org/category/conversations-with-lawmakers)*





## How to Become an Effective Lawmaker

*Based on research from the Center for Effective Lawmaking*

### ☒ Commit to being an effective lawmaker

#### DEFINE your lawmaking agenda

- ☐ **D**raw from your district
- ☐ **E**mploy your personal expertise
- ☐ **F**ocus on your top priorities
- ☐ **I**ntegrate your committee work into your agenda
- ☐ **N**ever give up on your core causes
- ☐ **E**xplore what works in other states

#### ENGAGE with your lawmaking partners

- ☐ **E**nlist experts, staff, and advocates
- ☐ **N**egotiate early with leaders
- ☐ **G**row bipartisan support
- ☐ **A**rticulate shared goals clearly
- ☐ **G**alvanize grassroots support
- ☐ **E**xpand your coalition beyond your chamber

## **DEFINE** Your Lawmaking Agenda

Our **DEFINE** mnemonic refers to which issues legislators choose to focus on when building their policy agenda. Our research and conversations with effective lawmakers suggest that Drawing on your district and constituency needs can be particularly constructive when trying to advance your agenda, as can Employing your past experiences and expertise. It is also important to Focus your agenda so that you are not engaging with too many issues at once. Integrating your committee assignments with your legislative priorities can likewise be especially helpful. And it is important to Never give up on your core causes and to remain open to Exploring lessons from what is working in other states.

### Pop Quiz Answers

1. False
2. True
3. True
4. False
5. False
6. True
7. False
8. False





## **D** Draw from your district

Legislators who align their lawmaking goals with the needs and interests of their districts are less likely to be pulled in different directions by their electoral and legislative activities. When what you are working on in the statehouse is also what your constituents care about most, those two parts of your job reinforce each other rather than compete. Our conversations with effective lawmakers across the country consistently reveal this same alignment among those who have been most successful at advancing their bills through the legislative process. Those who cultivate agendas rooted in their districts tend to develop deep policy expertise in areas that matter to the people they represent, and their colleagues take notice. Over time, other members come to see them as a go-to resource on those issues, which makes it easier to build the coalitions needed to advance legislation.

For new legislators in particular, a district-first focus offers a practical starting point. You may not yet know all the players, the procedures, or the unwritten rules of your chamber. But you do know your community. Starting with the problems that your constituents are actually facing gives you a clear sense of purpose, a natural base of support, and a ready answer to the question every new legislator eventually faces: what are you here to do?

## House Speaker Roger Hanshaw

*R-West Virginia*

House Speaker Roger Hanshaw (R-West Virginia) grounds his approach to public service in a simple but powerful belief:

***We all owe it to ourselves and our neighbors and our friends and family to make the place in which we live as good as we can make it.***

For most new legislators, that instinct naturally translates into a district-first focus. As Hanshaw observes, “It’s generally true of most newly elected legislators that in the early days of those careers one’s focus is generally on one’s own home community and one’s district, and that certainly was true for me.”\*



That local grounding can prove invaluable when statewide crises arise. When a chemical spill contaminated the Elk River water supply in 2014, shortly after Hanshaw entered the legislature, his deep familiarity with his community combined with his Ph.D. in Chemistry allowed him to make a contribution that few of his colleagues could have made. In the confusion that followed, Hanshaw was able to help ensure that lawmakers and regulators were focused on the right compound rather than a similar-sounding but chemically distinct substance that had been drawing attention.

Hanshaw’s experience is a reminder that where you come from and what you know are two of your most valuable assets as a new legislator. The problems that your community faces are frequently the ones that you understand best, and the knowledge that you bring from your own background, whether scientific, professional, or simply lived, can make a real difference when it is applied close to home. Starting there gives you the best chance of making a genuine contribution from your very first term. As we discuss in the next section, that same personal expertise can also be a powerful foundation for your broader legislative agenda.

*\*To watch the CEL interview with Speaker Hanshaw, visit [thelawmakers.org/conversations-with-lawmakers/discussing-effective-lawmaking-with-west-virginia-house-speaker-roger-hanshaw](https://thelawmakers.org/conversations-with-lawmakers/discussing-effective-lawmaking-with-west-virginia-house-speaker-roger-hanshaw)*



## **E** Employ your personal expertise

Every new legislator arrives with something that no orientation session can provide: a lifetime of experience. Whether you come from business, education, health care, local government, the military, community organizing, or any other field, that background is one of your most valuable assets. The challenge is recognizing it as such and putting it to work deliberately from the start.

Our research and conversations with effective lawmakers point consistently to the same lesson: legislators who build their early agendas around what they already know tend to hit the ground running. They can argue for their bills with confidence, hold their own in committee, and earn the respect of colleagues who might otherwise dismiss a newcomer. That credibility, built early, opens doors that might otherwise stay closed. And as a career develops, expertise grows through committee assignments, constituent casework, and the accumulated experience of session after session, expanding the range of issues that a legislator can tackle with authority.

## Assembly Member Amy Paulin

*D-New York*

Assembly Member Amy Paulin (D-New York) learned this lesson early. When she arrived in the Assembly in 2000, she made a deliberate decision to focus on what she already knew. “I knew that I needed to be able to argue for the bills that I did put in. So I chose those things that I knew about.” Before entering the legislature, Paulin had served on the Scarsdale Village Board, led the Westchester Women’s Agenda, served as president of the Westchester League of Women Voters, and worked as interim executive director of an agency serving survivors of domestic violence. That background gave her a running start on issues of local government, good governance, and women’s concerns. “I knew the women’s issues cold: choice, domestic violence. I knew them. There would be nobody there that I didn’t feel equal in knowledge, and able to carry my own.”\*



That strategic focus paid off quickly. Paulin’s results as a freshman were, by any measure, unusually strong. And while expertise naturally shaped her early choices, she notes that it continues to grow throughout a legislative career: “In the beginning I chose what I knew, and then over the years I’ve become chair of various committees. So you gain a lot of knowledge as chair, and you do a lot of legislation in those areas.” To date, more than 400 of her sponsored bills have been signed into law.

*\*To watch the CEL interview with Assembly Member Paulin, visit [thelawmakers.org/conversations-with-lawmakers/discussing-effective-lawmaking-with-ny-assembly-member-amy-paulin](https://thelawmakers.org/conversations-with-lawmakers/discussing-effective-lawmaking-with-ny-assembly-member-amy-paulin)*



## F Focus on your top priorities

New legislators often arrive at the statehouse with a long list of things that they want to accomplish. That energy and ambition is admirable, but it can also be a trap. A legislator who spreads attention across too many issues risks becoming known for nothing in particular, building shallow expertise in many areas rather than deep expertise in any. Our research consistently finds that the most effective lawmakers are those who concentrate their efforts on a focused set of priorities rather than pursuing a broad and diffuse agenda.\*

Note that choosing to specialize does not mean introducing only a handful of bills. It means clustering your legislative work around a limited number of issue areas where you can build genuine expertise, credibility, and coalitions over time. A focused agenda also makes it easier to integrate your priorities with your committee assignments, to attract cosponsors who share your specific interests, and to be taken seriously by colleagues and leaders who are deciding which proposals deserve floor time.

The right level of focus will vary from legislator to legislator and from state to state. But the underlying principle holds broadly: depth beats breadth when it comes to lawmaking effectiveness. Choose the issues that matter most to you and your constituents, commit to them, and let that commitment show in the bills that you introduce and the relationships that you build around them.

*\*For recent research on the value of specialization in Congress, please see Volden, Craig, and Alan E. Wiseman. Forthcoming. "Issue Specialization and Effective Lawmaking in the U.S. Congress." Journal of Politics.*

## Representative Carol McGuire

*R-New Hampshire*

Representative Carol McGuire (R–New Hampshire) has embodied this principle across a nearly twenty-year legislative career. An MIT-trained mechanical engineer who worked in the aerospace sector before retiring to New Hampshire, McGuire brought a systems-thinking discipline to the statehouse when she was first elected in 2008. Rather than engaging broadly across the full range of legislative issues, she identified two tightly connected lanes, government administration and the state retirement system, and committed to them. Session after session, her bills clustered around the same territory: administrative rulemaking procedures, professional licensing reform, and the long-term stability of New Hampshire’s pension obligations. She chaired the Executive Departments and Administration Committee and the Administrative Rules Committee repeatedly, not as a matter of chance, but because those positions matched the expertise that she had spent years building deliberately.



That focus produced results. Bills emerging from her committee work passed with strong bipartisan margins and were reliably signed into law, a pattern she sustained across multiple sessions and under different leadership arrangements. According to the Center for Effective Lawmaking, McGuire has earned the “Above Expectations” designation for eight consecutive legislative sessions and has ranked among the chamber’s top Republican performers since 2011. That sustained record was built largely without the structural advantages of majority leadership.\*

McGuire’s experience illustrates what focus looks like in practice over the long run. It is not a short bill list. It is a sustained commitment to a defined set of issues, deep enough that colleagues come to recognize you as a reliable voice on the things that matter most to you. The expertise that she built over nearly twenty years in government administration and retirement policy made her legislation more credible, her work in committee more authoritative, and her overall record more productive than a broader approach could have sustained.

*\*CEL State Legislative Effectiveness Scores for the 168th New Hampshire General Court (2023–2024). For further background, see “Meet the McGuires: New Hampshire’s Most Interesting Political Couple,” New Hampshire Journal / InsideSources, October 2017.*



## **I** Integrate your committee work into your agenda

Committee assignments are one of the most important institutional resources available to a state legislator. Committees are where bills live or die, where expertise is developed and recognized, and where relationships with colleagues are built over time. The most effective lawmakers treat their committee assignments not as an administrative formality but as a strategic asset, aligning their legislative priorities as closely as possible with the jurisdiction of the committees on which they serve.

When your bills are referred to a committee on which you sit, you have a natural platform to advocate for them, to engage directly with the deliberative process, and to build the relationships with committee colleagues that make passage more likely. When your bills fall outside your committee assignments, you are dependent on others to champion them in settings where you have less influence. That is not always avoidable, but it is a disadvantage worth minimizing.

For new legislators who do not yet have their preferred committee assignments, the advice is straightforward: work with what you have. Rather than waiting for the perfect assignment, look for ways to connect your priorities to the committees on which you already serve. Over time, as you build seniority and relationships, you will have more influence over where you sit. In the meantime, your committee work is one of the most reliable paths to the expertise and credibility that effective lawmaking requires.

## Senator Scott Wiener

*D-California*

Senator Scott Wiener (D-California) offers a clear illustration of what it looks like when a legislator's background, committee assignments, and legislative agenda are fully aligned. Before arriving in Sacramento in 2016, Wiener had spent years on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, where he chaired the County Transportation Authority and served on the Metropolitan Transportation Commission and the Golden Gate Bridge board. He came to the Senate with deep expertise in housing and land use policy already formed, and he pursued the Housing Committee chairmanship from the start. That assignment gave him the platform he needed. Over the sessions that followed, Wiener built a substantial body of legislation on housing production, transit-oriented development, and climate-aligned land use, work that advanced as far as it did precisely because he had both the committee jurisdiction and the policy knowledge to shepherd it through.



The alignment was not accidental. Wiener understood that the committee chair controls the agenda, shapes the deliberative process, and carries institutional credibility with colleagues on the issues that fall within the committee's jurisdiction. By anchoring his legislative identity in housing and transit, and by securing the committee assignments that matched those priorities, he made himself the natural author of consequential legislation in those areas session after session. According to the Center for Effective Lawmaking, he was named the most effective lawmaker in the California Senate for the 2023-2024 session and he has ranked in the top five in each and every term in which he has served.\*

*\*CEL State Legislative Effectiveness Scores for the 2023-2024 California State Legislature. To explore the full report, visit [thelawmakers.org/state-legislative-effectiveness-scores/announcing-the-release-of-the-2023-2024-california-state-legislature-state-legislative-effectiveness-scores-sles](https://thelawmakers.org/state-legislative-effectiveness-scores/announcing-the-release-of-the-2023-2024-california-state-legislature-state-legislative-effectiveness-scores-sles)*



## **N** Never give up on your core causes

Trying to successfully advance a legislative agenda can be dispiriting work. Depending on your state, many (or even most) of the bills that are introduced in any given session will never become law. It should perhaps be no surprise, then, that newly elected legislators who see their earliest efforts go nowhere are sometimes tempted to give up. Our research suggests that this would be a mistake. Success in early lawmaking stages in one session begets further success in the next. Introductions lead to hearings and committee action. Bills that make it out of committee but die on the floor are more likely to pass in future sessions. Simply stated, keep pushing your agenda and building your coalition, even when early results are discouraging. Perseverance pays off.

Persistence is most powerful when it is focused. As we note earlier in this guide, effective lawmakers tend to concentrate their energy on a limited number of priority issues rather than spreading themselves too thin. That focus makes it easier to build expertise, cultivate the right coalition partners, and keep returning to the same causes with greater knowledge and stronger relationships each session.

For legislators who face term limits, the calculus of persistence takes on a different dimension. You may not have the luxury of returning to the same bill session after session for a decade. But the underlying principle still holds, and in some ways the urgency is even greater. The goal shifts from outlasting the opposition yourself, to building enough momentum that your cause outlasts your tenure. That means bringing in coalition partners early, identifying a colleague who will carry the work forward when you are gone, and looking for opportunities to embed your priorities in larger legislative vehicles before your time runs out. The broader lesson is clear: even if you know your time in the legislature is finite, persistence and patience can still pay off. The key is to start building momentum early.

## Senator Katrina Shealy

*R-South Carolina*

Consider the experience of Senator Katrina Shealy (R-South Carolina), who served in the South Carolina Senate from 2012-2024, and who entered the legislature with a clear sense of purpose: “I didn’t get elected to get re-elected. I got elected to see what I could get done.” That conviction was tested repeatedly over her twelve years in the Senate. One telling example involves a boating safety bill introduced on behalf of a constituent whose son had been killed in a boating accident. Year after year Shealy got the bill through the Senate, only to see it blocked in the House by a single legislator who resisted any new regulations on the water. The family kept showing up and kept testifying. Finally, in her last year in the Senate, it passed. “You know if you keep on long enough, you’re gonna get something done.”\*



For Shealy, persistence meant more than simply reintroducing a bill year after year. It meant continuing to make the human case for it, one colleague at a time. “I think it’s having passion for the job, and caring enough about it to be persistent,” she reflected. That passion, she found, was itself persuasive. Rather than taking to the floor to argue her bills in the abstract, she preferred a more direct approach: walking across the aisle, sitting down at a colleague’s desk, and explaining whose life the bill would affect. When the argument was grounded in real human consequences, she found that party affiliation mattered far less than people assumed. The willingness to keep making that case, session after session, was what ultimately moved legislation forward.

*\*To watch the CEL interview with Senator Shealy, visit [thelawmakers.org/conversations-with-lawmakers/discussing-effective-lawmaking-with-south-carolina-state-senator-katrina-shealy](https://thelawmakers.org/conversations-with-lawmakers/discussing-effective-lawmaking-with-south-carolina-state-senator-katrina-shealy)*



## E Explore what works in other states

One advantage that state legislators have over their counterparts in Congress is the ability to learn directly from peers in other states who are wrestling with the same problems. Across fifty states, there is an enormous amount of policy experimentation underway at any given moment, on issues ranging from health care and education to infrastructure, criminal justice, and the environment. Some of those experiments succeed; others fail. Either way, the lessons are available to any legislator willing to look for them.

Effective state lawmakers treat other states as a resource. Rather than starting from scratch on every new policy challenge, they look first at what has already been tried elsewhere, studying model legislation, consulting with counterparts across the country, and drawing on national organizations that track policy innovation across the states.\*

Organizations like the National Conference of State Legislatures, the Council of State Governments, and numerous issue-specific networks exist precisely to help legislators learn from one another. Tapping into these networks early can save significant time and effort, and can point you toward solutions that have already been tested in comparable settings.

*\*For a deeper exploration of how and why policies spread across states, see Shipan, Charles R., and Craig Volden. *Why Bad Policies Spread (and Good Ones Don't)*. Cambridge University Press, 2022.*

## Senator Mimi Stewart

*D-New Mexico*

Senator Mimi Stewart (D-New Mexico) has made learning from other states a cornerstone of her legislative practice: “I’ve used other states and these national organizations. That always helps, finding out what somebody else is doing, and get copies of their legislation.” For Stewart, organizations like the National Conference of State Legislatures and the National Caucus of Environmental Legislators have been particularly valuable pipelines for new ideas, and she credits them with offering some of the ideas behind her environmental bills. Her advice to colleagues is direct:

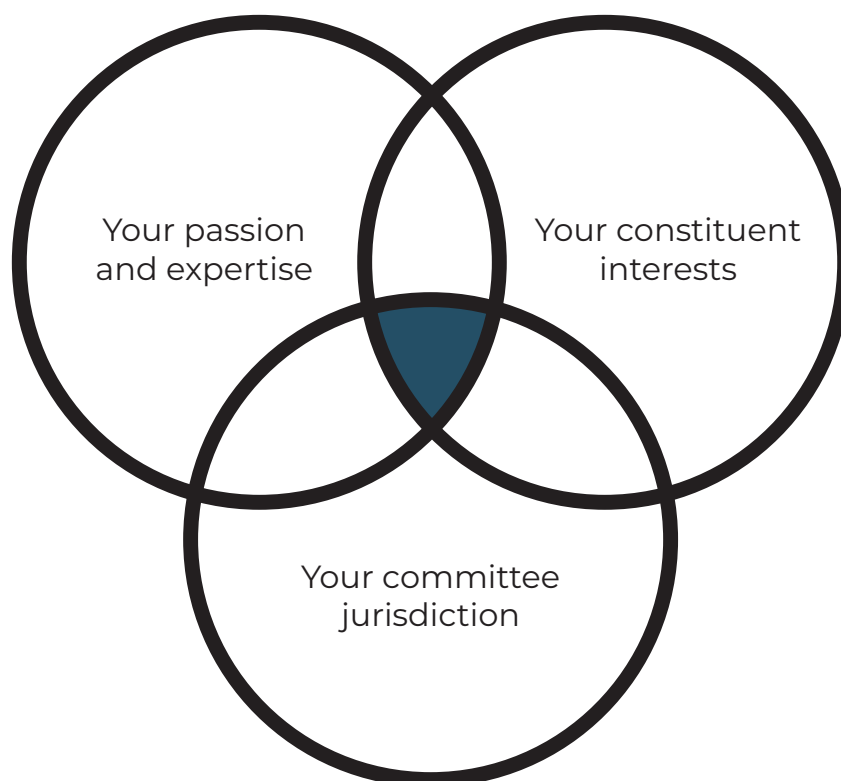
***Go someplace that’s doing it right and see what they’re doing different than we are doing.***



Cross-state collaboration becomes especially valuable on issues that no single state can solve alone. Stewart points to the Colorado River compact as a compelling example. New Mexico is one of seven states sharing rights to the Colorado River, and with shifting weather patterns and declining water supplies threatening the existing agreement, those states must collectively negotiate a new configuration. Through her involvement with the Council of State Governments West and its Colorado River Forum, Stewart has been able to bring that multi-state perspective directly back to her work in Santa Fe.\*

*\*To watch the CEL interview with Senator Stewart, visit [thelawmakers.org/conversations-with-lawmakers/discussing-effective-lawmaking-with-state-senator-mimi-stewart](https://thelawmakers.org/conversations-with-lawmakers/discussing-effective-lawmaking-with-state-senator-mimi-stewart)*

## HOW TO DEFINE YOUR LAWMAKING AGENDA



Which of your legislative priorities fall into all three of these circles? **Priorities that match your own passion and expertise, your constituent interests, and your committee jurisdiction are aligned for success!** For all others, there is more work to do.

For example, for a legislative priority that matches your expertise and constituent interests but lies outside your committee jurisdiction, you should seek out partners from the relevant committee.

Place each of your priority areas on this figure to identify next steps and where to dedicate your efforts to achieve lawmaking success.

## ENGAGE with Your Lawmaking Partners

Once you have done the work to DEFINE your legislative agenda, it is time to ENGAGE with numerous stakeholders to advance that agenda through the law-making process. Our ENGAGE mnemonic speaks to the various ways in which to interact with that broad set of partners.

Our research and conversations with effective state lawmakers suggest that legislators are more likely to engage effectively with others if they Enlist experts, staff, and advocates from the start. They also need to Negotiate early with committee and floor leaders, and to Grow bipartisan support. Being able to Articulate shared goals among potential coalition partners is likewise essential. We also find clear benefits from Galvanizing grassroots support, and from Expanding your coalition beyond your own chamber, including in the other chamber and the governor's office.

As with defining your legislative agenda, engaging with lawmaking partners is not a one-time exercise. Continually check back in with committee and party leaders. Shore up and expand your coalition whenever possible. Even casual conversations can turn into opportunities to advance your legislative goals.





## **E** Enlist experts, staff, and advocates

No legislator can be an expert on everything. The issues that come before a state legislature in any given session can range from agricultural water rights to cybersecurity to Medicaid reimbursement rates. Even the most experienced lawmakers rely on others to help them understand the technical dimensions of bills that they are working on, build the case for their proposals, and navigate the legislative process effectively.

The good news is that expertise is usually available if you know where to look for it. Depending on your state, you may have access to dedicated legislative staff, nonpartisan research offices, or bill drafting services. But even in legislatures where staff resources are limited, there is no shortage of people who can help: state bar associations, professional organizations, advocacy groups, academic institutions, and fellow legislators who have worked on similar issues in other states are all potential sources of knowledge and support. The key is to seek them out early and to approach them as genuine partners in advancing your legislative agenda.

The experts and advocates that you bring into your circle early are not just resources for a single bill. They become part of a network that grows with you over time. Staff who understand your priorities, experts who know your issue areas, and advocates who share your goals can all become long-term partners in your lawmaking work. Investing in those relationships from the start pays dividends not just in your first term but across your entire legislative career. The most effective lawmakers are rarely those who work alone; they are those who build and sustain the strongest teams around them.

## Representative Steve Fitzpatrick

*R-Montana*

Representative Steve Fitzpatrick (R-Montana) makes a habit of enlisting outside expertise to strengthen his bills. When constituents who had moved to Montana during COVID asked about converting their out-of-state limited liability companies to Montana entities, Fitzpatrick found that existing Montana law required a cumbersome process of dissolving and reforming the company from scratch. He drafted a bill and took it to the State Bar's business and trusts section for review.

***They took a look at it, offered me some amendments, and then it went through very easily. I think it passed unanimously out of both chambers.***



Fitzpatrick applies the same principle to his use of legislative staff on other bills. When drafting separate legislation to address COVID-related liability concerns, he had staff compile bills from about 20 different states, then spliced together the best elements before adjusting for Montana law. In both cases, the result was stronger legislation and a smoother path to passage than Fitzpatrick could have achieved working alone.\*

*\*To watch the CEL interview with Representative Fitzpatrick, visit [thelawmakers.org/conversations-with-lawmakers/discussing-effective-lawmaking-with-montana-representative-steve-fitzpatrick](https://thelawmakers.org/conversations-with-lawmakers/discussing-effective-lawmaking-with-montana-representative-steve-fitzpatrick)*



## **N** Negotiate early with leaders

The degree to which legislative power is concentrated varies from state to state, but in most chambers some legislators have considerably more influence over what comes to the floor than others. Committee chairs and party leaders often have the ability to advance legislation, slow it down, or stop it entirely. That is simply the reality of how legislative institutions are structured in many states, and effective lawmakers understand it clearly. Rather than viewing leadership power as an obstacle, the most successful legislators treat it as a map, a guide to whose support they need to cultivate and when.

The key word is early. Waiting until your bill has already been introduced to begin conversations with committee chairs and party leaders is often too late. Leaders who are surprised by legislation, or who first encounter a proposal when it is already moving, are less likely to be enthusiastic supporters than those who have been consulted from the beginning. Bringing leaders into the conversation early, even informally, gives them a sense of ownership over the process and makes it easier to address their concerns rather than allowing them to become obstacles.

This does not mean asking permission for everything that you want to do. It means being strategic about when and how you engage with those who hold institutional power. Understanding what your leaders are trying to accomplish in a given session, and finding ways to connect your priorities to theirs, is one of the most reliable ways to move legislation forward.

## Senator Sarah Anthony

*D-Michigan*

Senator Sarah Anthony (D-Michigan) knows this dynamic from both sides. She served five years in the Michigan House as a minority-party member, watching bills she cared about go nowhere because the committee chairs who controlled their fate had no stake in them. When Democrats won a trifecta in the 2022 elections and Anthony moved to the Senate as chair of the Appropriations Committee, she understood precisely what that shift meant, and what it required. She has reflected that policy expertise alone is not enough — that moving legislation requires being willing to personally cultivate relationships with committee chairs and party leaders. As she puts it, “this is all human work.”\*



That human work paid off on various fronts during her first Senate session. For example, Anthony had introduced the CROWN Act, a bill banning hair discrimination, repeatedly since 2019, only to see it go nowhere while Republicans controlled the chamber. When the opportunity arose in 2023, she pursued it simultaneously on two fronts: whipping votes to pass the first budget under the new Democratic majority in her role as Appropriations Chair, while at the same time personally lobbying House Republicans for their support on the CROWN Act. Both passed, with the CROWN Act earning overwhelming bipartisan support — 33-5 in the Senate and 100-7 in the House — before being signed into law by Governor Whitmer in June 2023.

According to the Center for Effective Lawmaking, Anthony was the most effective lawmaker overall in the Michigan Senate during the 2023-2024 legislative term, a distinction she carried into the majority after being the most effective Democratic lawmaker in the House in her final term there.

*\*To watch the CEL interview with Senator Anthony, visit [thelawmakers.org/conversations-with-lawmakers/discussing-effective-lawmaking-with-michigan-senator-sarah-anthony](https://thelawmakers.org/conversations-with-lawmakers/discussing-effective-lawmaking-with-michigan-senator-sarah-anthony)*



## **G** Grow bipartisan support

It might be tempting to assume that bipartisanship is a luxury, something that sounds nice in theory but rarely pays off in practice, especially in a polarized political environment. Our research suggests otherwise. Drawing on data from more than 400,000 bills introduced across 43 state legislatures, CEL researchers find that legislators who attract a greater share of cosponsors from the opposing party tend to be more effective lawmakers than those who rely primarily on support from within their own party. This mirrors what we have found in Congress, and it holds across a wide range of state legislative settings.\*

Bipartisan relationships tend to ease a bill's path through the legislative process and build long-term credibility with colleagues on both sides of the aisle. And one of the most effective ways to build that support is to offer it first. Legislators who make a habit of cosponsoring bills introduced by members of the other party are more likely to attract cross-party support for their own proposals in return. That reciprocity, built over time through consistent acts of collaboration, can become one of a legislator's most valuable assets.

*\*Dobson, Mackenzie R. "The Bipartisan Path Revisited: Collaboration and Legislative Effectiveness in the U.S. States." CEL Working Paper 2025-04, July 2025.*

## Senator Judy Lee

*R-North Dakota*

Senator Judy Lee (R-North Dakota) offers a compelling model for what sustained bipartisan collaboration looks like in practice. Her long-running partnership with Democratic Senator Kathy Hogan combines Lee's decades of experience in health and human services legislating with Hogan's background as a former director of Cass County Social Services for over 20 years, making the two of them a go-to resource on these issues for colleagues on both sides of the aisle. "We've kind of carved out our own little niche, I guess, but we have become kind of a resource for pretty much everybody."\*

Working across party lines on issues like the consolidation of North Dakota's Children's Health Insurance Program into Medicaid, their collaboration has helped advance policies that better serve kids and families. For Lee, the underlying philosophy is simple:

***You care about the people, you don't care about the R's and D's much.***

Bipartisan partnerships like Lee and Hogan's don't happen overnight. They are built through years of consistent collaboration, mutual respect, and a shared focus on outcomes rather than politics. For new legislators, the lesson is straightforward: look for colleagues across the aisle who share your policy interests, support their work, and invest in those relationships early. The credibility and trust that come from genuine bipartisan collaboration can open doors that purely partisan strategies cannot.

*\*To watch the CEL interview with Senator Lee, visit [thelawmakers.org/conversations-with-lawmakers/discussing-effective-lawmaking-with-north-dakota-senator-judy-lee](https://thelawmakers.org/conversations-with-lawmakers/discussing-effective-lawmaking-with-north-dakota-senator-judy-lee)*





## **A** Articulate shared goals clearly

Finding common ground with legislators who hold different views is one thing. Making that common ground visible and actionable is another. The most effective lawmakers do not simply hope that shared interests will be recognized. They work deliberately to identify and articulate goals that can draw in a broad coalition, including members who might not otherwise see themselves as natural allies. That skill of framing a problem in terms that resonate across party lines is one of the most valuable tools a legislator can develop.

This does not require abandoning your own priorities or pretending that disagreements do not exist. It requires looking carefully at what you and your potential partners actually need from a piece of legislation, as opposed to what each side might ideally want, and building from there. Often the overlap is larger than it first appears. Issues that seem hopelessly partisan at the national level can frequently be addressed at the state level in ways that attract genuine support from both sides, when the focus stays on practical outcomes rather than ideological positioning.

## Bill Howell & David Toscano

*R-Virginia, D-Virginia*

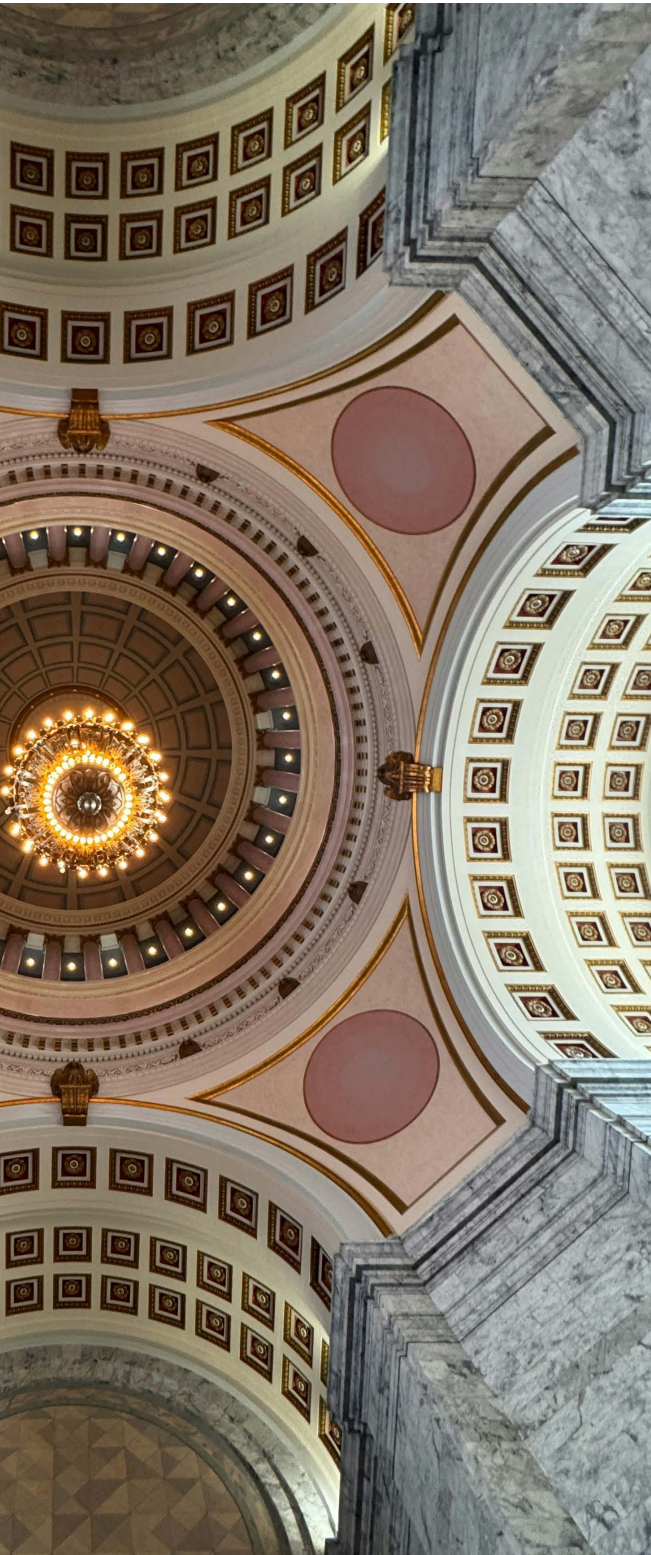
The experience of former House Speaker Bill Howell (R-Virginia) and former Minority Leader David Toscano (D-Virginia) offers a useful illustration of what can be accomplished when opposing sides focus on shared goals. Despite leading opposing caucuses, the two found common ground on a sweeping 2013 transportation bill that neither side could pass alone. Each made concessions to the other, producing a landmark bipartisan funding solution that gave neither side everything it wanted but gave both sides what they needed. As Toscano reflected,

***Legislating isn't an individual endeavor; collaboration is critical in addressing big issues.***



For both men, the ability to look past partisan differences and articulate goals that both sides could embrace was the essential ingredient, what Howell called simply “the Virginia Way.” Both also emphasized that this kind of collaboration does not happen overnight. For new legislators in particular, they stressed that listening and learning, and taking the time to build relationships and reputation before pushing for major change, lays the foundation for the trust that bipartisan work eventually requires.\*

*\*To watch the CEL event with Speaker Howell and Minority Leader Toscano, visit [thelawmakers.org/events/cel-event-effective-lawmaking-in-virginia](http://thelawmakers.org/events/cel-event-effective-lawmaking-in-virginia)*



## **G** Galvanize grassroots support

Effective lawmaking does not happen only inside the statehouse. Some of the most powerful forces in state legislative politics are the constituents, professional associations, and civic groups who care deeply about the issues on your agenda. Legislators who know how to mobilize that energy and channel it into the legislative process have a significant advantage over those who try to advance their priorities through insider relationships alone. And the benefits go beyond politics: the people and organizations that you engage with often bring knowledge, experience, and networks that can strengthen your legislation in ways that you might not anticipate on your own.

Grassroots support can make a difference at every stage of the legislative process. Constituents who show up to testify at committee hearings, write letters to colleagues, or simply make clear to their own representatives that an issue matters to them can shift the calculus for legislators who might otherwise be indifferent or opposed. That kind of visible, organized public support also sends a signal to leadership that a bill has a broader constituency behind it, which can be decisive in determining how far it advances.

Building grassroots support requires many of the same skills as building legislative coalitions. It means identifying who cares about your issue, communicating with them clearly and consistently, and giving them concrete ways to engage. It also means listening, because constituents and advocacy organizations often understand the real-world impact of legislation in ways that can sharpen your approach and broaden your coalition.

## Senator Holly Thompson Rehder

*R-Missouri*

Senator Holly Thompson Rehder (R–Missouri) spent nearly a decade learning that lesson firsthand. When she first took up the cause of establishing a statewide prescription drug monitoring program in the Missouri House in 2012, Missouri was already the only state in the nation without one. The policy case was clear: a centralized database allowing physicians and pharmacists to track prescriptions could identify patients at risk of addiction and reduce the doctor-shopping that was fueling Missouri’s opioid crisis. But opposition was organized and vocal, with privacy concerns repeatedly invoked to stall the bill in the Senate year after year.

Rehder’s response was to build a coalition that could match and outlast that opposition. She cultivated sustained support from physicians, pharmacists, nurses, and dentists—the healthcare professionals who understood most directly what the absence of a monitoring program meant for their patients. She worked closely with the Missouri Chamber Federation, a statewide grassroots network of local business chambers that made the bill a formal legislative priority. The Missouri Coalition for Community Behavioral Healthcare testified repeatedly that the state’s addiction safety net was overwhelmed. Families affected by opioid addiction showed up session after session to put a human face on the consequences of inaction. For Rehder, who has been open about her own family’s struggles with addiction, the cause was deeply personal. “This isn’t a political bill,” she said during floor debate. “It’s a bill for families and those struggling with addiction.”

After nine years of sustained effort, first in the House and then carrying the bill to the Senate, Rehder’s bill passed with broad bipartisan support and was signed into law by Governor Mike Parson in June 2021. Missouri became the last state in the nation to establish a statewide prescription drug monitoring program. At the bill signing, Rehder was visibly moved. “For years, we’ve had folks ask us, ‘Well, take this compromise,’ or ‘Take that compromise,’” she said, “but if it wasn’t a program that worked, we couldn’t do that. Because this is about the families and about working, not about getting legislation passed.”\*

*\*Tessa Weinberg, “Governor Signs Bill Ending Missouri’s Designation as Last State Without a PDMP,” Missouri Independent/KCUR, June 7, 2021. See also Missouri Independent, May 11, 2021, “Missouri House Approves Prescription Drug Monitoring Program, Sends Bill to the Governor.”*





## **E** Expand your coalition beyond your chamber

When you are focused on moving a bill through your own chamber, it is easy to lose sight of what comes next. But the most effective lawmakers think ahead. In most states, legislation must pass both chambers before reaching the governor's desk, and the path through one chamber is rarely identical to the path through the other. Relationships with members of the other chamber, with the governor's office, and with executive branch agencies are not luxuries to be cultivated later. They are essential to getting things done, and the earlier you start building them the better.

This kind of engagement requires a different mindset than the work of advancing a bill through your own chamber. It means understanding the priorities and pressures facing leaders in the other chamber and in the executive branch, finding partners there who share your goals, and being willing to adapt your proposals in ways that make them viable as they move forward. It also means being aware of the governor's priorities and looking for opportunities to align your proposals with them early in the process.

## Assembly Member Jason Frierson

*D-Nevada*

Assembly Speaker Jason Frierson (D-Nevada) made cross-chamber and cross-branch relationship building a deliberate priority throughout his tenure. “I served under both a Republican and a Democratic governor, and met with both, and had very fruitful relationships with both.” Strong staff support was central to making those relationships work:

***I think having adequate or exceptional staff really, really helped me in working with the minority party and the other House.***

To manage the inevitable tensions between the chambers, he and Senate leaders developed formal memoranda of understanding setting out rules of engagement between the two houses, a practical institutional solution that allowed both sides to focus on getting things done.\*

Frierson’s approach is a reminder that lawmaking extends well beyond your own chamber. The coalitions that move legislation across the finish line almost always include partners from the other chamber, from the executive branch, and from outside the legislature entirely. Building those relationships before you need them is one of the most valuable investments a new legislator can make.

*\*To watch the CEL interview with Speaker Frierson, visit the [lawmakers.org/conversations-with-lawmakers/discussing-effective-lawmaking-with-nevada-speaker-jason-frierson](https://thelawmakers.org/conversations-with-lawmakers/discussing-effective-lawmaking-with-nevada-speaker-jason-frierson)*



## ENGAGE PARTNERS FOR LAWMAKING SUCCESS

*Worksheet based on research from the Center for Effective Lawmaking*

Work with experts, staff, and advocates to establish the following partnership plan. Then assign tasks and due dates.

Bill title and/or number:

Other states where this policy has worked well:

Who benefits from this legislation (who shares our goals):

Potential experts, advocates, and partners:

Grassroots and community supporters to engage:

Potential cosponsors to target:

Likely committee:

Who on committee staff to approach:

When and how to approach the committee chair:

When and how to approach party leadership:

Partners in the other chamber:

Governor's office contacts:

## MOVING FORWARD

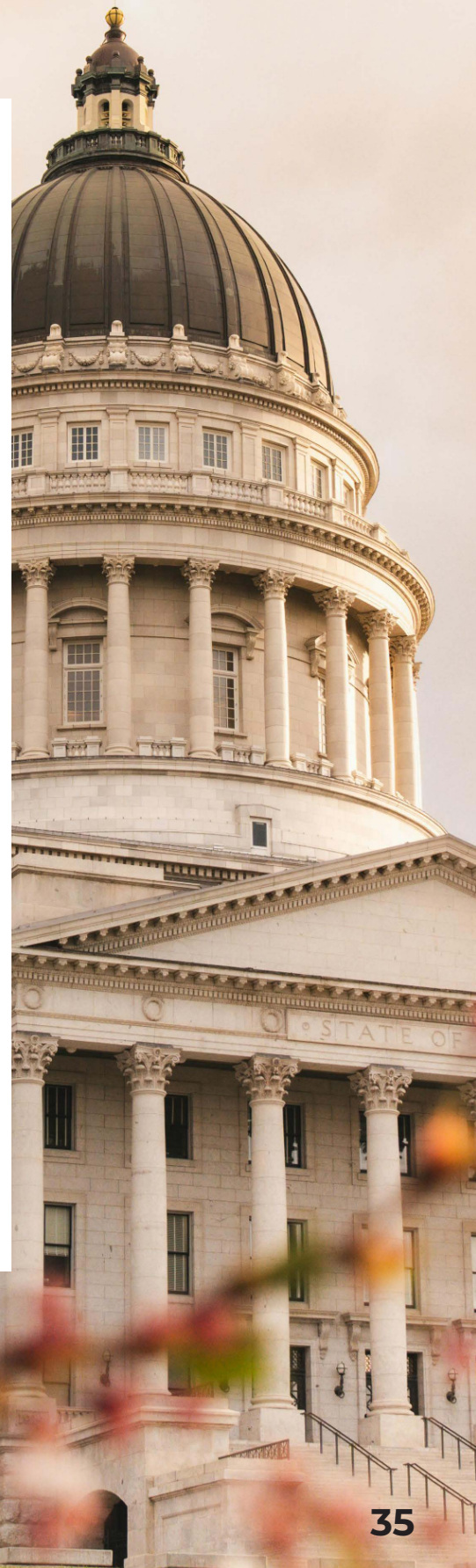
Congratulations again on your election to serve in your state legislature, and welcome to a distinguished tradition of lawmakers who have made a real difference in the lives of their constituents and their states.

We commend you for your commitment to being an effective lawmaker. We know you will DEFINE yourself and your legislative agenda well. You will draw from your district, employ your personal expertise, focus on your top priorities, integrate your committee work into your agenda, never give up on your core causes, and explore what works in other states.

We also know that you will ENGAGE with your lawmaking partners. You will enlist experts, staff, and advocates from the start, negotiate early with leaders, grow bipartisan support, articulate shared goals clearly, galvanize grass-roots support, and expand your coalition beyond your chamber. You recognize that these steps take effort and must be revisited time and again. And you are up for the challenge.

In short, you are poised for success. You are ready to be an effective lawmaker.

***For more information, articles, and research on effective lawmaking, we invite you to visit [www.thelawmakers.org](http://www.thelawmakers.org).***



## ABOUT THE CEL

The Center for Effective Lawmaking (CEL) is a joint partnership between the Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy at the University of Virginia and Vanderbilt University. It was created in 2017 to advance the generation, communication, and use of new knowledge about the effectiveness of individual lawmakers and legislative institutions, both in the U.S. Congress and across American state legislatures.

The Center grew out of the Legislative Effectiveness Project, based on the scholarship of Craig Volden and Alan E. Wiseman, as featured in the award-winning book *Legislative Effectiveness in the United States Congress: The Lawmakers*. The CEL has since expanded its work to encompass state legislative effectiveness, resulting in the development of State Legislative Effectiveness Scores for legislators across all 99 legislative chambers in the United States.



Today, the CEL is directed by Craig Volden of the University of Virginia and Alan E. Wiseman of Vanderbilt University. To advance the goals of the Center, Volden and Wiseman have undertaken numerous research projects, brought together a team of scholars across the country, hosted an annual research conference, created materials to help lawmakers become more effective, and provided opportunities for public involvement through events with former and current legislators.

Support for the Center for Effective Lawmaking is provided by the College of Arts and Science at Vanderbilt University, the Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy at the University of Virginia, the U.S. Democracy Program of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation, and individual donors.

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