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Who Runs for Congress?

More Often, Effective State Lawmakers

Newly released scores show 34 of 37 recent state legislators now seeking congressional seats met or exceeded expectations in their state legislatures

Effective state lawmakers are more likely to run for Congress, according to a new study in the *American Political Science Review*, and this year's candidates fit that pattern. Of 37 recent state legislators now running for the U.S. House or Senate, 34 (92%) met or exceeded expectations for lawmaking effectiveness in their state legislatures, according to newly released State Legislative Effectiveness Scores (SLES) from the Center for Effective Lawmaking.

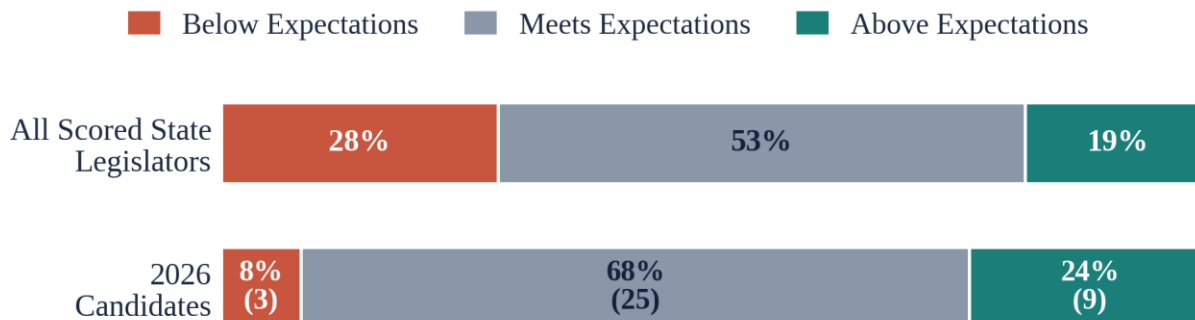
One potentially attractive feature of American federalism is the experience that state legislators receive before moving on up to Congress: between 1973 and 2025, about half of all Members of Congress were previously state lawmakers. The new study, by Danielle M. Thomsen (University of California, Irvine), Sarah A. Treul (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), Craig Volden (University of Virginia), and Alan E. Wiseman (Vanderbilt University), asks whether the highest performing state lawmakers are the ones who make the move. Drawing on State Legislative Effectiveness Scores for legislators in 97 state legislative chambers from 1993 to 2018, the authors find:

- **Effective lawmakers run more often.** For example, in open, safe seats, legislators who exceeded expectations in their lawmaking effectiveness ran for the U.S. House 13.2% of the time, while only 8.0% of those who were below expectations in their lawmaking effectiveness ran, meaning that more effective lawmakers were roughly 50% more likely to seek the seat.
- **They reached Congress at higher rates.** Legislators who met or exceeded expectations in lawmaking effectiveness were nearly twice as likely to be elected to the House as those below expectations.
- **The difference comes from who runs.** Among candidates, lawmaking effectiveness showed no statistically significant relationship to winning primary or general elections. Voters often do not know about the lawmaking effectiveness either of congressional incumbents or of candidates with previous state legislative experience.

Applying the same analysis to this year's candidates, the Center for Effective Lawmaking found that 9 of the 37 current candidates exceeded expectations in lawmaking effectiveness in their penultimate term in the state legislature, 25 met expectations, and 3 fell below. That means that only 8% of the 2026 candidates fell below expectations in lawmaking effectiveness when serving in their state legislatures, compared with about 28% of all state legislators in the Center's database. The results are similar across parties: 18 of 19 Republicans and 16 of 18 Democrats in the group met or exceeded expectations. The candidates come from

26 states. A table of the 37 candidates and their ratings is available at https://thelawmakers.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/10/Appendix_State_Legislators_Ratings_CEL.pdf.

State Legislators by Lawmaking-Effectiveness Rating



Source: State Legislative Effectiveness Scores, Center for Effective Lawmaking (thelawmakers.org). 2026 Candidates: 37 state legislators now seeking the U.S. House (31) or Senate (6) who served in 2023–24 and have scores for their penultimate term, rated on that term; numbers in parentheses are counts of candidates. All Scored State Legislators: all 102,285 scored legislator-terms in the Center’s database, each term counted separately. Above and Below mean the legislator’s SLES was at least 50% above or below a benchmark based on majority-party status, seniority, and committee-chair status, respectively; all others Meet expectations.

The 37 candidates are those who served in state legislatures during the 2023–24 terms, for which the Center recently released scores, and for whom scores are available for their penultimate term. For those still serving, 2023–24 is their most recent scored term; for those who have left office, it is the term before their last. Thomsen et al. find that using the penultimate term to evaluate lawmaking effectiveness avoids distortions from the different tactics that legislators may adopt in a final term, such as campaigning for higher office. Candidates without a scored 2023–24 term or a scored penultimate term, such as legislators first elected in 2024, are not included in this analysis.

A legislator is “above” expectations if their SLES is at least 50% above a benchmark score, and falls “below” expectations if it is at least 50% below. The benchmark is the score that is predicted for a legislator based on their majority-party status, seniority, and whether they chaired a committee within the chamber and legislative term being analyzed. All other legislators, near their benchmarks, are categorized “meets” expectations.

Two current candidates illustrate the consistently strong lawmaking performance highlighted here. Brock Smith, a Republican state senator from Oregon running for the U.S. Senate, ranked among the three most effective Republican lawmakers in his chamber in each term from 2017 to 2024. Amish Shah, a Democrat and former Arizona state representative running for the U.S. House, ranked first or second among Democratic lawmakers in the Arizona House in each term from 2019 through 2024. Numerous other examples point to a pattern in which successful state lawmakers are disproportionately more likely to run for Congress.

According to Center Co-Director Craig Volden from the University of Virginia, “State legislatures can serve as effective policy laboratories. This work shows that they also serve as pipelines for effective lawmakers to move on up to Congress, offering a promising cohort of new national leaders.”

And, as noted by Center Co-Director Alan Wiseman from Vanderbilt University, “the 2026 elections are illustrative of a general pattern that we have observed in previous elections: more effective state lawmakers are more likely to seek seats in Congress, which suggest that after learning how to obtain lawmaking success in their home states, they are excited to apply these skills and talents at the national level.”

The scores describe lawmakers’ records in their state legislatures. The study examines historical patterns, and this release makes no predictions about the outcome of any 2026 race.

Learn more

- The study: Thomsen, Treul, Volden, and Wiseman. 2026. “Legislative Effectiveness, Progressive Ambition, and Electoral Success,” *American Political Science Review*.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055426101683>
- State Legislative Effectiveness Scores: <https://thelawmakers.org/find-representatives>
- Appendix: state legislators running for Congress in 2026, with penultimate-term ratings:
https://thelawmakers.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/10/Appendix_State_Legislators_Ratings_CEL.pdf
- Center for Effective Lawmaking: <https://thelawmakers.org>

About the Center for Effective Lawmaking. The Center for Effective Lawmaking is a joint partnership between the University of Virginia’s Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy and Vanderbilt University. Founded in 2017, it seeks to advance the generation, communication, and use of new knowledge about the effectiveness of individual lawmakers and U.S. legislative institutions. The Center is directed by Craig Volden (University of Virginia) and Alan E. Wiseman (Vanderbilt University).

The Center for Effective Lawmaking does not endorse candidates.

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