BEING AN EFFECTIVE LAWMAKER FROM DAY ONE



Center for
Effective Lawmaking

A joint venture between
The Batten School at the University of Virginia and Vanderbilt University

Craig Volden, Professor of Public Policy and Politics
Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy
University of Virginia
volden@virginia.edu

Alan E. Wiseman, Associate Provost of Strategic Projects
Cornelius Vanderbilt Professor of Political Economy
Vanderbilt University
alan.wiseman@vanderbilt.edu

WELCOME

Congratulations from the Center for Effective Lawmaking (CEL)! You have recently been elected to Congress, and you're joining the select group of men and women who have served in the United States House of Representatives and United States Senate for more than 235 years. What comes next?

You have arrived at this institution 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 items through the different stages in the legislative process from bill introduction to (hopefully) culmination into a new law? How do you become an effective lawmaker?

In this pamphlet we present lessons that we've learned from the analysis of half a century of data on the legislative activities of members of the U.S. Congress. We scoured the advice that new members of Congress typically receive from their parties, government agencies, and good governance organizations. We then translated those pieces of advice into testable hypotheses and explored what happened to the legislative proposals of those who followed the advice, and those who did not. Based on the CEL's Legislative Effectiveness Scores (LES), we find that some of that advice is extremely valuable, while other suggestions seem to make little difference whatsoever.



Craig Volden, PhD
Co-Director, CEL
University of Virginia



Alan E. Wiseman, PhD
Co-Director, CEL
Vanderbilt University

TABLE OF CONTENTS

How Do We Know? 1

Pop Quiz 3

Seeking Answers to These Important Questions 4

DEFINE Your Lawmaking Agenda 6

ENGAGE with Your Lawmaking Partners 14

Moving Forward 22

About the CEL 23

HOW DO WE KNOW?
Defining and Measuring Legislative Effectiveness

Representatives and Senators engage in many activities of interest and of value to their constituents. They make speeches in Congress that express the views of their constituents in a public forum. They actively contribute to the oversight mission of the legislative branch, by participating in hearings on the actions of the executive branch or private sector. They engage in valuable casework for their constituents in ways that other public officials simply cannot do.

While all of these activities, and many others, are important and valuable aspects of a Representative's or Senator's job, our definition and metric of legislative effectiveness focuses entirely on the proven ability of a legislator to advance his or her agenda items (meaning the bills that he or she sponsors) through the legislative process and into law.

More specifically, we measure the legislative effectiveness of a U.S. Representative by drawing data on every public bill (H.R.) that was introduced into the United States House of Representatives during a two-year Congress. For each sponsor, we identify how many of a member's bills received some sort of action in committee, any action beyond committee, passed the House, and became law. Bills are up-weighted or down-weighted depending on the underlying substantive significance of the bill's content. And members are given credit when their bill language is significantly embedded in other legislative vehicles that become law.

Then, using these different bill-level indicators, we calculate a Representative's Legislative Effectiveness Score (LES), which parsimoniously captures how successful a given member of the U.S. House is at moving his or her legislative agenda, in comparison to all other members of the House, across a two-year congressional term.[1]

Legislative Effectiveness Scores are calculated in an analogous manner for members of the U.S. Senate, where we identify the fates of each public Senate Bill (S.) that is introduced by each Senator in each two-year Congress.[2]

[1] For more details, see Chapter 2 of: Volden, Craig, and Alan E. Wiseman. 2014. *Legislative Effectiveness in the United States Congress: The Lawmakers.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

[2] See: Volden, Craig, and Alan E. Wiseman. 2018. "Legislative Effectiveness in the United States Senate." Journal of Politics 80(2): 731-735. Beginning with the 118th Congress we have also incorporated House Joint Resolutions and Senate Joint Resolutions into the calculation of Legislative Effectiveness Scores for members of the House and Senate, respectively.

Employing this methodology, we have calculated Legislative Effectiveness Scores for every member of the House and Senate since the 93rd Congress (1973-today). The Scores are calculated to take an average value of "1" in each chamber, which facilitates clear interpersonal comparisons across Representatives and Senators in a two-year Congress. As might be expected, we find that members of the majority party, committee and subcommittee chairs, and more senior members are more effective than minority-party members, rank-and-file, and more junior legislators. Beyond such patterns, our explorations focus on the different strategies of newly elected members, to see which actions have helped some become much more effective lawmakers than others.

To learn more about our methodology, as well as see all Legislative Effectiveness Scores, visit thelawmakers.org.



POP QUIZ

All newly elected members of the House and Senate are presented with a diverse range of orientation materials from different organizations, such as their respective political parties, the Congressional Research Service, the Congressional Management Foundation, and other groups. Based on our analyses, some of the following pieces of advice were True while others appeared to be False. Can you guess which is which?

1. Hiring a chief of staff or legislative director with extensive experience on Capitol Hill is crucial to effective lawmaking in one's first term. T/F

2. Hiring a chief of staff or legislative director who previously served a lawmaker from your state/district is crucial for effective lawmaking. T/F

3. Majority-party lawmakers who join ideological caucuses, such as the Blue Dog Coalition or the Republican Study Committee, tend to be more effective at lawmaking. T/F

4. Minority-party lawmakers who join ideological caucuses, such as the Blue Dog Coalition or the Republican Study Committee, tend to be more effective at lawmaking. T/F

5. Obtaining a seat on the "prestige" or "power" committees is crucial to becoming an effective lawmaker. T/F

6. Obtaining a seat on a committee aligned with one's expertise or constituent interests is crucial to becoming an effective lawmaker. T/F

7. Lawmakers who mainly attract cosponsors from their own party are more effective than bipartisan lawmakers. T/F

8. Specialists, who build up expertise in a limited number of issue areas, tend to be more effective than generalists with more diverse interests. T/F

Answers on page 6

These questions collectively engage with many aspects of business that a newly elected member of the House or Senate needs to address quickly: who to hire for one's staff, how to focus one's agenda, how to engage with members of one's own party (as well as members of the opposing party), and how to position oneself within the chamber in terms of committee assignments. The answers to these questions, in turn, speak in a profound way to nearly every part of your business day as you strive to advance your agenda.

SEEKING ANSWERS TO THESE IMPORTANT QUESTIONS



As alluded to above, we seek to answer these questions by drawing on the lessons that have emerged from our collected research on legislative effectiveness, as presented in numerous peer-reviewed academic publications, publicly circulated working papers, and our ongoing analyses – all of which can be found at www.thelawmakers.org. We also draw heavily on the research presented in our book, *Legislative Effectiveness in the United States Congress: The Lawmakers*.[1] This book has become a common reference source for scholars of legislative effectiveness, and it was the recipient of the Gladys M. Kammerer Award for the best book on U.S. National Policy as well as the Fenno Prize for the best book in legislative studies.

Among other findings in the book, we highlight "The Habits of Highly Effective Lawmakers." Specifically, we identified twenty members of the U.S. House who were lawmaking over-performers across our thirty-six year period of analysis. Our research explored the tactics they employed across their careers to facilitate their lawmaking success.[2]

Drawing on these habits, as well as other aspects of our research, collectively points to two broad categories of activities that legislators might seek to engage with if they want to be effective lawmakers.

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

[1] Volden, Craig, and Alan E. Wiseman. 2014. *Legislative Effectiveness in the United States Congress: The Lawmakers*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
[2] The complete list of the twenty most "Highly Effective Rank-and-File Lawmakers" can be found on p. 166 in Volden and Wiseman (2014).

Center for Effective Lawmaking

How to Become an Effective Lawmaker in Congress

Based on research from the Center for Effective Lawmaking

- [x] Commit to being an effective lawmaker
- [ ] DEFINE your lawmaking agenda
  - [ ] **D**istrict interests are crucial
  - [ ] **E**xpertise from prior experiences as starting point
  - [ ] **F**ocus agenda on your top priorities
  - [ ] **I**ntegrate committee assignment with agenda
  - [ ] **N**ever give up
  - [ ] **E**xcitement and passion help
- [ ] ENGAGE with your lawmaking partners
  - [ ] **E**xperienced legislative staff are essential
  - [ ] **N**egotiate with committee and floor leaders
  - [ ] **G**row bipartisan cosponsorships
  - [ ] **A**rticulate shared goals
  - [ ] **G**enerate caucus partnerships
  - [ ] **E**xpand coalition beyond own chamber

www.thelawmakers.org

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

UVA BATTEN

DEFINE Your Lawmaking Agenda

Our **DEFINE** mnemonic refers to which, and how many, issues legislators choose to focus on when building their policy agenda, as well as the manner in which they seek to advance their issue agendas. Our research suggests that cultivating policy expertise based on your **D**istrict and constituency needs, as well as your past **E**xperiences can be particularly constructive when trying to advance your agenda. Likewise, it is also important for a new member of Congress to **F**ocus your agenda in such a way that you are not engaging with too many issues. And it can be especially helpful to **I**ntegrate your position of institutional influence (such as your committee assignment) to advance your legislation. Finally, it is important to **N**ever give up and to retain your **E**xcitement for the long road ahead.



Answers to pop quiz on page 3

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

D: District interests are crucial

Legislators who align their legislative goals with state and district interests are less likely to be pulled in different directions by their electoral and lawmaking activities. Such an alignment was found repeatedly among the most effective lawmakers whom we studied. Those who cultivated agendas that reflected the priorities of their districts tended to develop a highly specialized degree of policy expertise, which resonated with the clear needs and interests of their constituents. Other members of Congress frequently deferred to these legislators' collective expertise as they sought to advance their policy goals.

An example of a highly effective legislator who cultivated a policy portfolio that builds closely on his district roots is Representative Joe Neguse (D-Colorado). His district spans more than 12,000 square miles, larger than many states, and includes Rocky Mountain National Park. As such, Neguse has built his legislative agenda tightly around public lands, wildfire mitigation, and water policy — issues inseparable from the place he represents.



In an interview with the Center for Effective Lawmaking, Neguse explained that his focus areas reflect both personal investment and "an issue that the district, the community that you represent is very invested in."[1] Over 52 percent of his district is public land, and Neguse described himself as "a Coloradan, through and through, who loves his state and who grew up hiking in Rocky Mountain National Park."

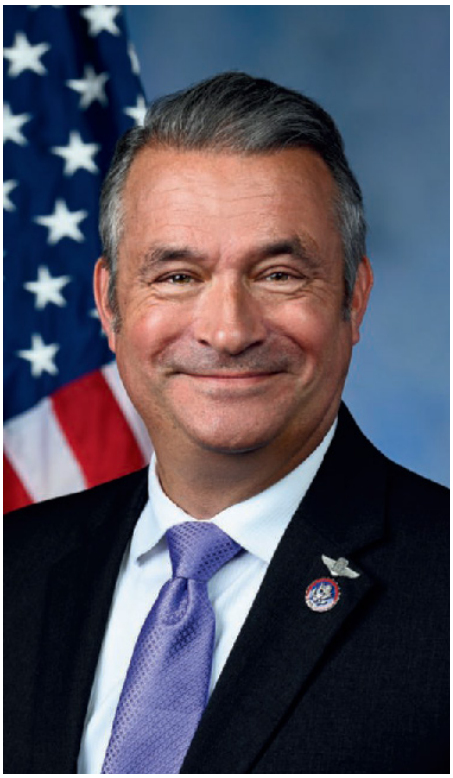
That specialization showed up directly in the numbers. In the 116th Congress (2019-2021), for example, Neguse introduced 54 bills — three times the freshman average — and steered three into law, including an expansion of Rocky Mountain National Park. In the 117th Congress, he again concentrated his agenda on public lands and natural resources, and saw language from two of his bills, including the Secure Rural Schools Reauthorization Act, incorporated into the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.

This alignment contributed to his rank as the most effective Democratic freshman lawmaker in the 116th Congress, and the most effective member of either party on public lands policy in that Congress. He has since built on that specialization through his service on the Natural Resources Subcommittee on Federal Lands.

[1] To watch the interview, go to https://thelawmakers.org/video/discussing-legislative-effectiveness-with-representative-joe-neguse

E: Expertise from prior experiences

Whereas some newly elected lawmakers in Congress clearly thrive by cultivating a legislative agenda that is focused on their constituencies, others succeed by specializing in areas that are quite closely related to their prior experiences or occupations. Prior service in a state legislature, for example, may be useful. That said, new members who fail to recognize the large differences between Congress and their home state will miss out on opportunities for success. Other prior occupations are often equally helpful. Expertise in areas such as banking, health care, and education, can all present crucial knowledge in formulating public policies in particular areas.



Our recent study found that the recent wave of veterans entering Congress were often quite effective as lawmakers.[1] Consider Representative Don Bacon (R-Nebraska), for example, who entered Congress in 2017. Prior to serving in the U.S. House, Congressman Bacon served in the United States Air Force for almost 30 years, where he specialized in electronic warfare, intelligence, and reconnaissance; and he was the recipient of numerous decorations, including the Air Force Distinguished Service Medal, and two Bronze Stars.

From the time that he was elected to Congress, Bacon focused most of his lawmaking attention on defense and armed services-related issues. He was likewise successful at leveraging his institutional positions in the House, as a member of the House Armed Services Committee, to ensure that several of his sponsored bills were incorporated, in large part, into the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA).

For example, in the 117th Congress (2021-2023), he sponsored bills engaging with matters such as the needs of veterans who have suffered from traumatic brain injuries, military energy security, and developing uniform credentials for military policy – all of which (and several others) were ultimately incorporated into the NDAA, which became law in 2023.[2]

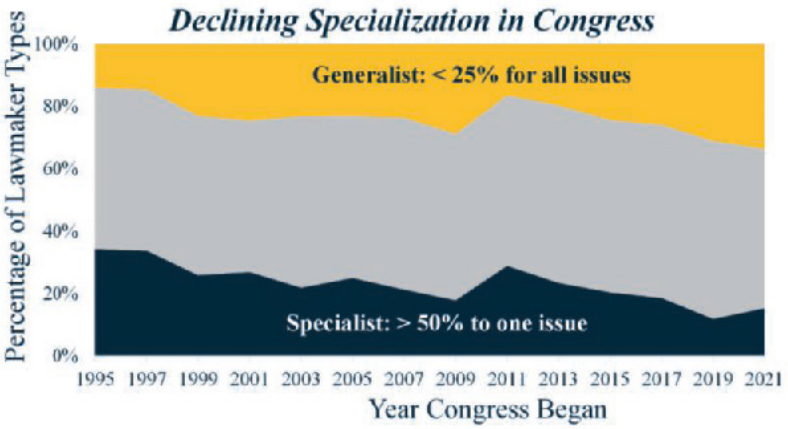
[1] These findings and analyses are presented in Amoroso, Joseph G. 2025. "Deployed to the Hill: Military Experience and Legislative Behavior in Congress." *Political Research Quarterly* 78(1): 358-375.

[2] To watch at CEL interview with Congressman Bacon, go to https://thelawmakers.org/conversations-with-lawmakers/discussing-effective-lawmaking-with-representative-don-bacon

F: Focus agenda on top priorities

Being a newly elected member of Congress puts you in a position to represent many different points of view and constituent perspectives. Depending on the composition of one's district or state, expertise, and interests, freshmen might come to Congress with the intention of pursuing policy changes in many different areas, ranging from health to education to agriculture.

However, our research suggests that the most effective lawmakers are those who focus on just a few specific issue areas, rather than cultivating an extremely diverse issue portfolio. This does not mean putting forward just a few bills; rather, the benefit comes from clustering one's bills in areas that build upon district needs, expertise, or committee assignments.



More specifically, drawing on all bill introductions of all Representatives and Senators since the early 1970s, we identified the proportion of each legislator's bills that fell into their one main issue area.[1] We found that the most effective lawmakers struck a balance between being highly specialized while still engaging with a limited number of issue areas. In the Senate, the most effective lawmakers introduced approximately 50% of their bills in one issue area. Yet, as this figure shows, less than 20% of members of Congress today achieve these levels of specialization.



Representative Nick Begich (R-Alaska) offers an unusual test of this advice. As Alaska's lone House member, he cannot divide specialties across a delegation the way larger states do. Instead, he clustered his agenda tightly around his Natural Resources and Transportation and Infrastructure committee assignments, matched to Alaska's resource economy and infrastructure needs. Doing so helped him to become the most effective freshman lawmaker in decades.[2]

[1] Volden, Craig, and Alan E. Wiseman. 2026. "Issue Specialization and Effective Lawmaking in the U.S. Congress." *Journal of Politics*.
[2] To watch the interview, go to https://thelawmakers.org/conversations-with-lawmakers/discussing-effective-lawmaking-with-alaska-congressman-nick-begich

I: Integrate committee assignments with agenda

In exploring the careers and legislative strategies of the most highly effective rank-and-file lawmakers in the U.S. House, another common theme that emerged is that they advanced policy agendas that were very closely connected to their committee assignments. That is, most of the bills that they introduced were substantively related to (and referred to) their committees. Hence, many of these Representatives were in a position of relative influence to see their bills advance through the legislative process, in comparison to what would occur if they introduced a bill that would be referred to a committee over which they had no direct influence. In some cases, we can even identify Representatives who clearly altered the substantive portfolio of the bills that they introduced after they changed their committee assignments, thereby ensuring that their legislative agendas were closely tied to their committee positions.



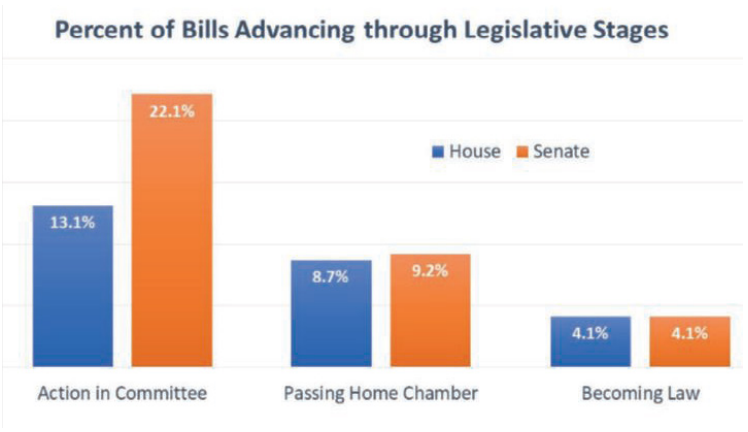
Observers are sometimes surprised to see Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-D.C.) among our lists of highly effective lawmakers. As a Delegate, she does not have full voting rights in the House. However, she is allowed to serve on committees and to introduce legislation. In doing so, she has followed the advice found here nearly perfectly. First elected to Congress in 1990, Holmes Norton has retained a focus on her district, advancing numerous measures on behalf of the District of Columbia. This work aligns well with her assignment to the subcommittee on the Federal Workforce, the Post Office, and the District of Columbia.

Another significant part of Holmes Norton's legislative agenda is dedicated to her other assignment to the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure. In this area, she has focused on highway funding, Amtrak, and museums, combining her district interests with her committee assignments once again.[1]

Our research offers support for the common advice that new lawmakers should seek seats on committees that engage with policy areas in which they hold (or seek to acquire) expertise. However, members do not always receive their most desired committee assignments. Those who are disappointed might be tempted to disengage with lawmaking or to continue down the path they had intended, had they been given their preferred assignment. Instead, tailoring your legislative portfolio to your assigned committees and subcommittees is likely to be a much more effective strategy to advance your legislative agenda.

[1] For more lawmaking insights from Del. Holmes Norton, to go: https://thelawmakers.org/blog/watch-race-political-representation-inside-outside-of-congress

N: Never give up



Trying to successfully advance a legislative agenda can be dispiriting work. After all, as one of 435 Representatives or one of 100 Senators, you are competing for scarce time, resources, and attention among your colleagues, and the chamber as a whole. As a result, it should perhaps be no surprise that among the thousands of bills that are introduced in any two-year Congress, only about 4% of those bills (on average) will be signed into law. In light of such stark statistics, it might be tempting to throw in the towel if you find that your earliest efforts at advancing your bills go nowhere. For newly elected legislators who seek to become effective lawmakers, however, we would suggest that you not become discouraged.

If there was ever a profession for which the adage "if at first you don't succeed…try, try again" holds, lawmaking is it. Our research suggests that consistently attempting to advance your legislative goals, even following clear failure, can eventually pay off.

For example, consider Representative French Hill (R-Arkansas). First elected to the 114th Congress, he quickly established himself as one of the most effective Republican lawmakers in the House, and he was one of the few Republican members who consistently saw his bills advance into law regardless of whether he was in the majority or minority party. In an interview with the Center for Effective Lawmaking, Rep. Hill points to how he and his staff have developed a tactical and operational plan for measuring success across a two-year session of Congress, despite the fact that some of his policy proposals might not advance their way into law in any given Congress.[1] His office is organized to track the number of bills he introduces, how far each of those bills has proceeded through committee and onto later legislative stages, whether those bills have companion bills in the Senate, and other intermediate steps in the lawmaking process. Rep. Hill recognizes that progression across each of these steps — either in the current Congress or future Congresses — is a necessary precondition for lawmaking success.



More broadly considered, we find that success in early lawmaking stages in one Congress begets further success in the next. Introductions lead to hearings and markups. Likewise, those Representatives whose bills made it out of committee only to die on the floor in a given Congress were more likely to have their bills pass and become law in future Congresses.[2] Simply stated, continue to push your agenda and build out your coalition in each Congress, even if you are less successful than you had hoped initially. Perseverance pays off.

[1] To watch at CEL interview with Congressman Hill, go to https://thelawmakers.org/conversations-with-lawmakers/discussing-legislative-effectiveness-with-representative-french-hill
[2] Further information about these analyses can be found in the Appendices to Chapter 2 in Volden and Wiseman (2014).

E: Excitement and passion help

One of the most crucial elements for becoming an effective lawmaker is deciding that you want to engage in lawmaking. As naïve as that statement might sound, it is not obvious that all Representatives or Senators want to spend their time engaging in the long (and sometimes very disappointing) grind that is associated with the lawmaking process. In any given two-year Congress, one can observe some Representatives who introduce scores of bills, as they try to advance their agendas; some Representatives only introduce a handful of bills; and a few Representatives introduce no bills at all. Similar patterns hold for the Senate, as well. Members of Congress need to decide how they want to spend their time, and where to devote their attention and energies; and for some Senators and Representatives that has not included dedicating much effort to lawmaking.



Make no mistake, however, the most effective lawmakers have to deliberately choose to devote their energies to the practice of lawmaking. Consider former Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Florida), for example, who served in Congress from 1989-2019, representing significant portions of Miami in her congressional district. In an interview with the Center for Effective Lawmaking, she is very forthcoming about how she was especially driven to serve as a legislator, and to engage directly with the concerns of her constituents. She was passionate about foreign affairs policy, owing to the fact that she had immigrated from Cuba when she was eight years old, and she hoped that Cuba would become a democracy again someday.[1]

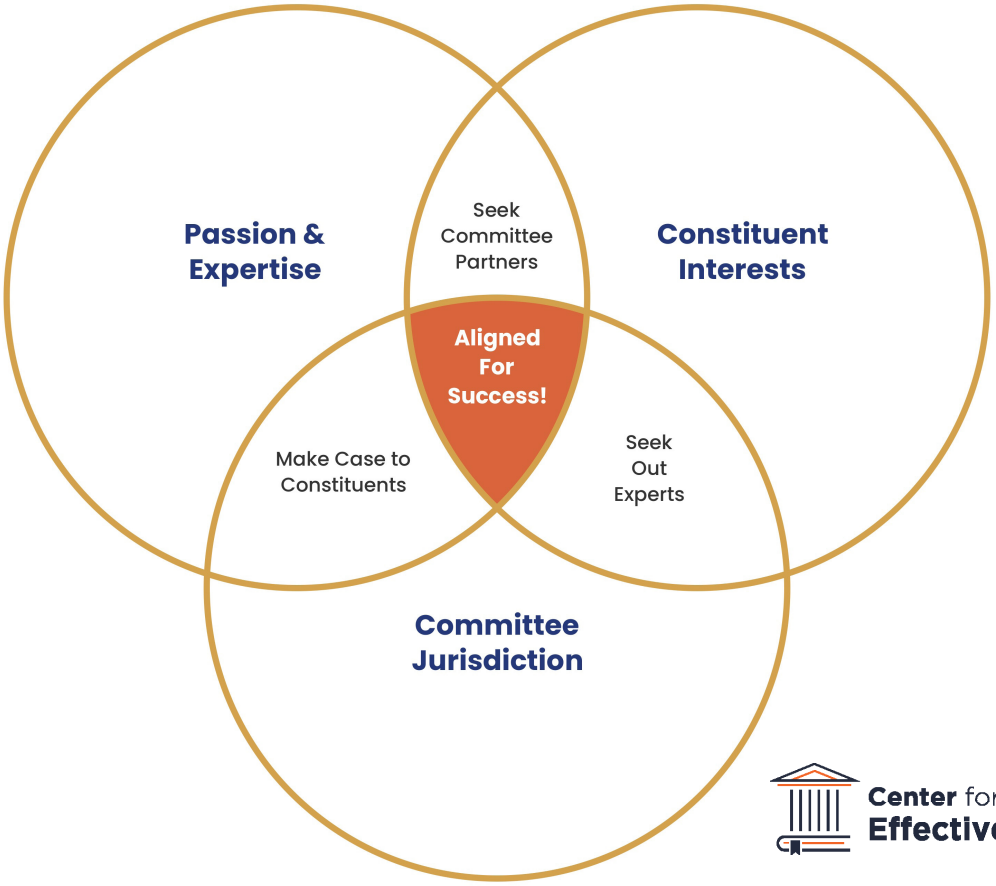
Her commitment to constituency concerns, combined with her passion for foreign affairs contributed to her being among the top 10 most effective Republican lawmakers in the U.S. House in each of the 110th-112th Congresses. She was also the most effective lawmaker (of either party) in advancing international affairs policies in the 112th Congress.

Given how many bills are introduced in each Congress and how little time there is for them to move forward, Representatives and Senators have to be committed to do what they can to keep their bills moving along, if they ever want to achieve legislative success. Passion for policymaking (at least in some areas of interest) and excitement about doing the necessary hard work of legislating can be contagious, motivating staff and coalition partners to strive to succeed as well.

As you seek to DEFINE your lawmaking agenda, you may find it helpful to spend time with your legislative staff considering the issue areas on which your committee assignments and district interests align with your passion and expertise. Placing issues on the diagram on the next page is a helpful exercise.

[1] To watch at CEL interview with Rep. Ros-Lehtinen, go to https://thelawmakers.org/conversations-with-lawmakers/discussing-legislative-effectiveness-with-representative-ileana-ros-lehtinen

HOW TO DEFINE YOUR LAWMAKING AGENDA



Center for Effective Lawmaking

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

For example, in the upper middle, 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.

www.thelawmakers.org

ENGAGE with Your Lawmaking Partners

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

Our research suggests that members of Congress are more likely to engage effectively with others if they are able to hire and retain highly **E**xperienced legislative staff. They also need to work early on to **N**egotiate with and cultivate the support of committee and subcommittee chairs, as well as floor leaders. Contrary to recent claims about the death of bipartisanship, our research also points to the clear benefits that follow from encouraging and **G**rowing bipartisan collaborations between legislators, and by being able to **A**rticulate shared goals among potential coalition partners. We are also able to demonstrate that there are clear benefits from **G**enerating caucus partnerships, specifically by joining an intraparty caucus, when in the minority party, to help advance one's legislative agenda. Finally, lawmakers can also be especially successful at advancing their agendas if they can proactively **E**xpand their coalitions to include partners who are outside of their own chamber, such as within the other chamber, or the White House, to help them advance their bills through the final steps and into law.

As with defining one's legislative agenda, engaging with lawmaking partners takes time and careful consideration. It is also not a linear one-time process. Continually check back in with committee and party leaders. Shore up and expand your coalition whenever possible. Even casual meetings and conversations can turn into opportunities to advance your legislative goals.



E: Experienced legislative staff are essential

One of the first things that you need to do is to set up your congressional office – hiring staff in key positions. The roles of staff can be extremely diverse from managing the front reception area, to maintaining and administering the district office, to communications, to helping advance your legislative agenda. While you can potentially choose from among a wide range of enthusiastic and devoted employees, including those who have served valuably on your campaign, our research suggests that you should be very deliberate in selecting who to bring into your office – especially if you want to be a highly effective lawmaker.

Looking at two decades of data on staff allocations, we found that there is a clear but subtle relationship between legislative staff experience and lawmaking effectiveness. Contrary to some advice that new members are given, having a large legislative staff does not necessarily contribute to a member's lawmaking effectiveness. Nor is it the case that retaining the staff from the previous holder of your office contributes to lawmaking effectiveness in any meaningful way.

However, especially across your first few years in Congress, there is a significant benefit from having a legislative staff with prior Capitol Hill experience. This effect fades later in one's legislative career as legislators learn the intricacies of lawmaking. That said, having at least one legislative staffer, typically as chief of staff or legislative director, with many years of experience on the Hill pays tremendous dividends for policymaking in both the short- and long-term.[1]



Senator Steve Daines (R-Montana) had learned the value of relying on experienced staff in his business career, expanding Proctor & Gamble's business in Asia and RightNow Technologies in Montana. When he entered the House in 2013, he hired a legislative staff with extensive Capitol Hill experience. Their expertise helped him advance his legislative priorities in short order, advancing bills on irrigation, watershed protection, and hydropower development to passage in the House before his election to the Senate in 2014.

From a practical perspective then, our research suggests that freshmen should seek to hire and retain at least one highly experienced legislative staff member, who will be invaluable in advancing their agendas. Whoever you hire at first, make his or her subsequent retention a high priority. Invest in creating an environment in which your staff can thrive, achieving their own goals as well as those of you and your constituents.

[1] These analyses and findings are presented in: Crosson, Jesse M., Geoff Lorenz, Craig Volden, and Alan E. Wiseman. 2020. "How Experienced Legislative Staff Contribute to Effective Lawmaking." In Drutman, Lee, Kevin Kosar, and Timothy LaPira (eds.) *Congress Overwhelmed: The Decline in Congressional Capacity and the Prospects for Reform.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

N: Negotiate with committee and floor leaders

A pervasive finding that emerges from decades of studying the House and Senate is that committee chairs and subcommittee chairs are consistently among the most successful lawmakers in Congress after Congress. Whether advancing their own sponsored bills or proposals on behalf of their committees, their party, or their constituents, they have an enormous track record of success. They also have the power to stop the proposals of others early on.

While your own service as a committee chair may be well into the future, you must work now to coordinate your efforts with the relevant committee and subcommittee chairs, given your policy area of interest. Have your staff confer with key committee staff, and check in with your party's leadership. Emphasize the importance of your proposals for a broad array of legislators' interests, and make clear how your proposal advances the goals of the party and committee leaders.



In describing the evolution and ultimate passage of the PACT Act of 2022 in a Center for Effective Lawmaking interview, Representative Mark Takano (D-California) was explicit about key negotiations. His interactions with party leadership, and then-Speaker Nancy Pelosi especially, were instrumental in securing his sponsored bill's passage in the House, and in its major provisions ultimately becoming law. While it was true that he held the influential position of Chair of the Veterans Affairs Committee, which provided him with natural connections to important veteran services organizations, it was Speaker Pelosi's connections to an even larger group of veteran service organizations, and several other important stakeholders, that led to the incorporation of certain crucial elements in the bill that helped to galvanize support among a large bipartisan coalition in both the House and Senate. Rep. Takano's coordination with leadership helped to ensure that an issue that had previously stalled was finally addressed with a new law.[1]

More broadly considered, leaders will make clear the party and committee priorities for the term. If your proposals align with those priorities, explore that overlap further. Is it better to advance a stand-alone bill, or to work to incorporate your proposals as part of a larger legislative vehicle? Party and committee leaders will often suggest whom to coordinate with or where to make changes.

Once you know the landscape, you will be best positioned to use your limited time and political capital wisely.

[1] To watch the interview with Rep. Takano, go to https://thelawmakers.org/conversations-with-lawmakers/discussing-effective-lawmaking-with-representative-mark-takano

G: Grow bipartisan cosponsorships

National media headlines suggest that we are living in one of the most polarized times in the history of American politics, where the Republican Party and Democratic Party have become increasingly divided and divisive in Congress. This may lead one to believe that legislators are making virtually no effort to seek common ground across party lines. In such an environment, a question that naturally emerges is: are there any clear payoffs for lawmaking effectiveness from trying to cultivate bipartisanship? Our research suggests that the answer to this question is a resounding "Yes!"



More specifically, data from the early 1970s through today demonstrate that legislators whose bills attract 40-50% of their cosponsors from the other party are more successful overall than legislators whose bills are cosponsored largely (or entirely) by members of their own party. This is true even for legislators who attract the same overall number of cosponsors to their bills. In other words, bipartisanship pays off.

Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska) stands among the legislators who have consistently attracted bipartisan cosponsors to their legislation. Her ability to attract a wide range of cosponsors to her bills, regardless of party, has helped her advance her bills through the different stages of the lawmaking process. Doing so helps both when in the minority and the majority party. As one example of such bipartisanship, Sen. Murkowski picked up the work left behind by former Senator Heidi Heitkamp (D-North Dakota) in advancing Savanna's Act – offering guidance for law enforcement responses to reports of missing and murdered Native Americans – with the support of 29 cosponsors, including 19 Democrats. President Trump signed the bill into law in October of 2020.

Our research also demonstrates that one main way to attract cosponsors from the other party is to offer similar support yourself. Such reciprocity is rarely unrewarded in lawmaking. This finding may appear obvious for members of the minority party, whose proposals cannot move forward without some degree of support from across the aisle. Perhaps surprisingly, however, we find that such bipartisanship is beneficial for the lawmaking success of majority-party legislators as well.[1]

Conversations with those who hold different views are more likely to point to issues that can be resolved early, avoiding unexpected roadblocks later in the lawmaking process. Legislators and staff who internalize bipartisan coalition-building as part of their overall legislative strategy are better able to move their bills forward in a timely manner. And doing so rarely requires a level of compromise that depletes the essence of your legislative goals too substantially.

[1] These analyses and findings are presented in: Harbridge-Yong, Laurel, Craig Volden, and Alan E. Wiseman. 2023. "The Bipartisan Path to Effective Lawmaking." Journal of Politics 85(3): 1048-1063.

A: Articulate shared goals

The most effective lawmakers in Congress are consistently willing to seek coalition partners beyond their natural comfort zone: members who are ideologically different from themselves, interest groups and experts beyond Congress, and policymakers in the executive branch – even those with opposing views and interests. Whether working with party leaders, committee chairs and their staffs, or policymakers of either party, it is important to seek areas of common ground and make those shared goals clear.



This strategy has been fruitful for the most entrepreneurial and effective lawmakers. Consider Representative Darren Soto (D-Florida), for example, who was first elected to the U.S. House in 2016 and has built a legislative record centered on finding common ground across the aisle. As he put it in an interview with the Center for Effective Lawmaking, "you'll notice that most of the bills I pass, I have a Republican co-sponsor or a Republican sponsor in the Senate."[1]

To that end, he pointed to his membership in the Problem Solvers Caucus, a group of Republican and Democratic members of the House who aim to find common ground and cultivate bipartisan solutions to pressing policy problems. For example, Soto described working with Rep. Mike Waltz (R-Florida), a colleague whose views differ sharply from his own on some issues, noting "Mike and I might have debated, vociferously, over issues that we disagree on" — but they found shared ground on a problem affecting both of their districts alike.

That shared-goal approach produced results. Soto and Waltz co-signed a bipartisan letter on Interstate 4 congestion, a highway corridor both of their districts depend on, which helped secure a $3.4 billion expansion of the highway. Soto has applied the same approach on various fronts, such as legislation dealing with technology and national security. On the whole, Soto's approach to lawmaking has been highly effective: The CEL identified him as the most effective Democratic lawmaker in his freshman class in the 115th Congress (2017-2019).

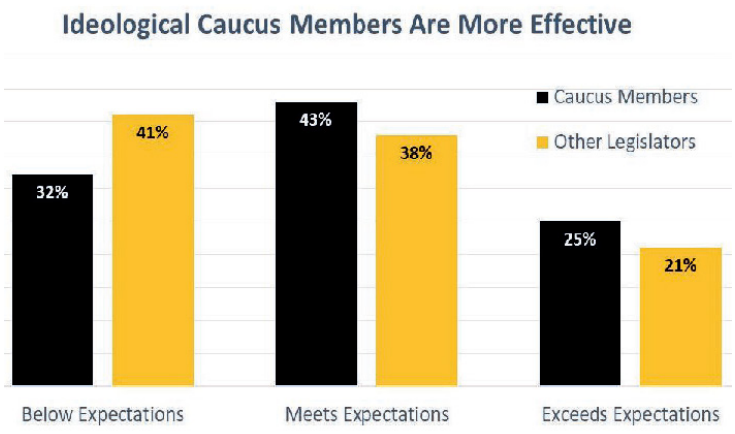
Even in a Congress often defined by partisan battles, effective lawmakers are frequently able to engage policy issues without being explicitly partisan, finding a clearly defined problem to be addressed and clearly articulated shared goals among coalition partners.

[1] To watch the interview, go to https://thelawmakers.org/conversations-with-lawmakers/discussing-effective-lawmaking-with-representative-soto

G: Generate caucus partnerships

In the contemporary House, intra-party caucuses, such as the Main Street Partnership, the House Freedom Caucus, the New Democrat Coalition, and the Blue Dog Coalition, are visible forces in the chamber, with a significant majority of incoming members choosing to join one of these organizations. Given the pervasiveness of these caucuses in the U.S. House, one might wonder whether these intra-party factions can harness the collective energies of their members to achieve their policy goals. In other words, will you benefit, in advancing your legislative agenda, by joining an intra-party caucus? Alternatively, are you better served by working with your party's leaders or with legislators from across the aisle?

To engage with these questions, we looked at members of eight different intra-party caucuses in the U.S. House of Representatives since 1995 (the Blue Dog Coalition, the Progressive Caucus, the Tea Party Caucus, the New Democrat Coalition, the Republican Main Street Partnership, the Republican Study Committee, the Populist Caucus, and the House Freedom Caucus), exploring their relative lawmaking effectiveness before and after they joined a caucus. We find that Representatives do, in fact, become more successful at advancing their legislative agendas by joining an intra-party caucus.



As the figure suggests, caucus members were more likely to be in our Exceeds Expectations category than are other representatives, and less likely to be Below Expectations. These categories are relative to benchmarks we give to each member of Congress based on their seniority, their membership in the majority or minority party, and their service as a committee or subcommittee chair.[1]

These overall patterns mask some variation in the conditions under which joining ideological caucuses holds the most value, however. In particular, we find no overall lawmaking cost or benefit from caucus membership among majority-party legislators.

Rather, Representatives who associate with an intra-party caucus when they are in the minority party are more successful at advancing their agendas than are other minority-party members. Caucuses offer valuable resources and coalition-building opportunities that minority-party lawmakers might otherwise lack. [2]

[1] All member scores and benchmarks are shown at the end of each Congress at https://thelawmakers.org/find-representatives/
[2] These findings and analyses are presented in Clarke, Andrew, Craig Volden, and Alan E. Wiseman. 2024. "The Conditional Lawmaking Benefits of Party Faction Membership in Congress." *Political Research Quarterly* 77(1): 121-136.

E: Expand your coalition beyond your own chamber

When focused on advancing a piece of legislation, it is easy to get caught up in navigating the politics of your own chamber, without considering what happens next. The most effective lawmakers play a longer game, however, identifying a well-positioned partner to advance their policy goals within the other chamber.

For example, consider Senator Gary Peters (D-Michigan), who had the distinction of being the most effective lawmaker in the 116th Senate (2019-2021), despite the fact that he was a member of the minority party. He maintained his high level of engagement with the legislative process to emerge as the most effective lawmaker in the next two Senate terms, as well. Consistent with many of the lessons above, Senator Peters focuses on cultivating bipartisan connections, in that he always aims to secure at least one Republican cosponsor for any bill that he introduces into Congress. He likewise cultivates a policy agenda that has deep roots in his constituency; and he recognizes the importance of an experienced and engaged staff.



In a conversation with the Center for Effective Lawmaking, Senator Peters also pointed to another important aspect of his lawmaking strategies: the ability to leverage connections to other members of the Michigan congressional delegation — including Republican Representatives — to help advance their shared goals. Having served in the U.S. House for six years prior to being elected to the Senate, Senator Peters cultivated valuable relationships with other members of Michigan's congressional delegation, and he became sensitive to the needs of constituents in different parts of his state. In trying to advance his bills, he recognizes the importance of them passing through both chambers of Congress — not just the Senate. As such, he actively seeks coalition partners among House members early in the legislative process, which helps to facilitate his lawmaking success.[1]

More broadly considered, it is important to recognize that cultivating coalition partners outside of one's chamber might require a Representative or Senator to give up bill ownership, in order to see his or her policy goals advanced; but for those who are most interested in advancing a legislative agenda, such a strategy can yield huge dividends. Effective lawmakers play the long game.

On the whole, to effectively **ENGAGE** with lawmaking partners, you must plan your coalitional strategy early on and adapt it to changing circumstances. Working with your staff on the checklist on the next page offers a good start.

[1] To watch the interview with Senator Peters, go to https://thelawmakers.org/conversations-with-lawmakers/discussing-legislative-effectiveness-with-senator-gary-peters

Center for Effective Lawmaking

Engage Partners for Lawmaking Success

Based on research from the Center for Effective Lawmaking

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

Bill title: _____

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

_____

Potential cosponsors to target: _____

_____

Potential caucus partners: _____

_____

House/Senate partners: _____

_____

Likely committee: _____

_____

Who on committee staff to approach: _____

_____

When/how to approach committee/subcommittee chair: _____

_____

When/how to approach party leadership: _____

_____

www.thelawmakers.org

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

UVA BATTEN

MOVING FORWARD



Congratulations again on the rare and unique opportunity to be a member of Congress, a leader of this great country.

Additionally, we commend you for your commitment to being an effective lawmaker. We know you will **DEFINE** yourself and your legislative agenda well. You will remember that district interests are crucial, expertise from prior experience useful, a focused agenda key, and integrated assignments helpful to advance your legislative agenda, to never give up, and to maintain your excitement and passion.

We also know that, as a member of Congress, you will **ENGAGE** with your lawmaking partners. You will seek the assistance of experienced legislative staff, negotiate with committee and floor leaders, grow a bipartisan coalition, articulate shared goals, generate caucus partnerships, and expand your coalition beyond your own 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.

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 U.S. legislative institutions. 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*.

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 with a diverse portfolio of work about effective lawmaking, 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, the Peter G. Peterson Foundation, and individual donors.

© 2026 Center for Effective Lawmaking

The Center for Effective Lawmaking
thelawmakers.org

Garrett Hall
235 McCormick Road
Charlottesville, VA 22904

(434) 243-7180
thelawmakers@virginia.edu

UVA BATTEN

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY