Legislative Effectiveness, Progressive Ambition, and Electoral Success

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Abstract

Are effective state lawmakers more likely than ineffective state lawmakers to be elected to Congress? We draw on a new dataset of state legislative effectiveness scores for nearly 60,000 state legislators from 1993 to 2018 to examine the relationship between lawmaker effectiveness and the decision to run for, and ultimately be elected to, the U.S. House of Representatives. We find that more-effective state lawmakers are more likely to ultimately enter Congress. This pattern is due more to the progressive ambition of candidates than to voter decisions. Specifically, more-effective lawmakers are much more likely to run for U.S. House seats than are their less-effective counterparts. However, there is essentially no relationship between a state legislator's lawmaking effectiveness and the likelihood that she wins her primary or general House election upon deciding to run. Our findings offer important insights into how American federalism contributes to representation by effective lawmakers.

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As the United States struggles with questions regarding the efficacy of its democratic and lawmaking institutions, proponents of political reform often speak to the virtues of empowering political outsiders. Whether they are drawn from industry, education, activist communities, or broader celebrity circles (e.g., actors or game show hosts), numerous reformers on the left as well as the right have argued that real change in Washington, DC, can only be obtained by electing those who have not spent the majority of their careers inside the beltway. Although there are certainly outside-the-beltway candidates who have never held elective office, another common "outsider" path is through the state legislature. A substantial number of representatives and senators begin their careers outside of Washington, albeit within state legislatures. Indeed, between the 93rd-115th Congress (1973-2019), between 42-53% of members of Congress had served some time as members of their state legislatures; and state legislative office is the most common pathway through which members enter office (Carnes 2013, Hirano and Snyder 2014, 2019, Thomsen 2017). In the 116th (2019-2021) Congress, more than half of the membership had previously served in a state legislature. As to whether being a state legislator constitutes being a true "outsider" is open for debate; they certainly have different backgrounds from the "outsiders" who lack any legislative experience. Yet, they are from outside of Washington, they increasingly run on their "outsider" status, and given that such a substantial proportion of Congress is drawn from these state legislators, it is worth understanding the relationships between the underlying qualities of these state lawmakers and their subsequent career paths. While recent scholarship empirically shows the benefits of state legislature service in the pursuit of higher office (McCrain and O'Donnell 2022), it remains to be tested whether it is simply the state legislative service that

matters or if the quality and adroitness of that service is also important in determining a state legislator's decision to run for higher office and the likelihood that she is successful.

Ideally, one of the benefits of American federalism is that state legislative experience enhances the quality of national representatives. This, of course, relies on the best of the state legislators being the ones to seek out and win seats in the U.S. Congress. Legislators who excelled at the state level would be more likely to seek higher office and would be able to make a compelling case to voters based on their lawmaking success. If such a process were working well, with state legislatures offering a "farm team" for Congress, proponents of political reform should, perhaps, reconsider their definition of political "outsiders," promoting those who have been outside DC but have proven their worth at policymaking and reform in the states.

Drawing on data from the lawmaking activities and electoral ambitions of legislators in 97 state legislative chambers between 1993-2018, we uncover strong evidence of effective lawmakers in the states being more likely to end up in Congress than are ineffective lawmakers. We then ask whether this pattern arises due to the progressive ambition of effective lawmakers or due to the preferences of voters. On this point, we find that more effective state lawmakers are notably more likely to run for a seat in the U.S. House than are their less-effective lawmaking counterparts. However, we also demonstrate that, among those who chose to run, state legislators who are more effective lawmakers are no more likely to win their primaries or their general elections than less-effective state lawmakers.

In other words, the process resulting in populating Congress with more effective state legislators is driven by supply-side considerations – their willingness to run – more than by demand-side preferences of voters. These findings suggest that candidate recruitment may play a larger role in the quality of legislators in Congress than does electoral choice by voters.

Exploring the Relationship Between State Legislative Experience and Higher Office

Scholars of congressional elections have long noted the increased success of candidates with prior experience in elective office (Jacobson and Carson 2019, Abramowitz 1991, Canon 1990, Maisel and Stone 1997). The ability to win a previous election is an excellent indicator of one's potential to win a seat in Congress, as it provides individuals with political resources, including lawmaking and policy experience, political connections, name recognition, staff resources, and fundraising acumen (e.g. Jacobson and Carson 2019, Maestas et al. 2006, Box-Steffensmeier 1996). Serving in the state legislature is particularly valuable because it offers individuals opportunities to gain experiences and develop political resources akin to those needed to campaign for and serve in Congress. State legislators get experience drafting, debating, and amending legislation, serving on committees, representing constituents, and running political campaigns (Berkman 1993, Maestas et al. 2006). For these reasons it is unsurprising that state legislators often develop ambitions to serve in Congress (Black 1972, Schlesinger 1966). These state legislators with aspirations for higher office demonstrate what Schlesinger (1966) labeled progressive ambition. Scholarship on progressive ambition finds factors such as being term limited, constituency overlap between the current and future districts, and whether there is an open seat influence when officeholders act on their progressive ambition and make a bid for higher office (Rohde 1979, Brace 1984, Treul 2009).

Several studies have drawn on samples of state legislators to examine variation in progressive ambition and the choice to run for Congress (i.e., Aldrich and Thomsen 2017; Hall 2019; Maestas et al. 2006; Maisel and Stone 2014; Phillips, Snyder, and Hall n.d.; Stone and Maisel 2003; Thomsen 2014, 2017). Additionally, anecdotal evidence points to prominent Members of Congress who cultivated their lawmaking skills while serving in state legislatures.

Retired Congressman Barney Frank (D-MA), for example, explains (Frank 2015) how he learned the nuts and bolts of legislative policymaking while serving in the Massachusetts House of Representatives; and the successes that he obtained in the statehouse influenced the tactics and strategies that he employed when he came to Congress. More recently, Bucchianeri, Volden, and Wiseman (2021) point to how highly effective lawmaker Representative Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY) likewise had a significant track record of being very successful at advancing his legislative agenda in the New York State Assembly, prior to serving in the U.S. House. To the extent that Congressmen Frank and Jeffries represent a more general pipeline of effective state lawmakers taking their talents to the halls of Congress, we should find a systematic pattern of successful state legislators being elected to Congress at a greater rate than their less successful counterparts. State legislators who adroitly mastered the legislative and representational responsibilities at the state-level should be the ones most likely to want to act on progressive ambition.

Two main processes could plausibly explain a pattern of effective state lawmakers entering Congress at a greater rate than ineffective state lawmakers – a choice by potential candidates or a choice by voters (or both). Specifically, one possibility is that those state legislators who are successful in advancing their agendas recognize that they are generally more skilled in lawmaking than others. They find lawmaking to be rewarding and they seek to apply their skills in a more prominent legislative arena: the U.S. Congress. Such sentiments would be consistent with broader progressive ambition literatures, beginning with Rohde (1979) and advanced by a wide range of scholars including Fowler (1993), Fowler and McClure (1989), Hall (2019), Maestas et al. (2006), Maisel and Stone (2014), Stone and Maisel (2003), and Thomsen (2014, 2017). This literature points to how potential candidates are cognizant of their skills and limitations, as well as the opportunities that are provided to them given the current political

environment; and they make choices about whether to run for higher office in a manner consistent with maximizing their expected utility.

For those state legislators who value bringing about policy change, amassing a track record of legislative successes at the state level might inform them about their underlying ability to advance their agendas more broadly, such as through service in the U.S. Congress. Such progressive ambition, based on their ability to make a policy impact, might induce them to choose to run for higher office. In contrast, those who are not successful in advancing legislation at the state level should have little reason to believe that they will achieve any more success in Congress, and may therefore be less inclined to run. Volden and Wiseman (2014, pp. 33-36) found such divergent paths between high-performing and low-performing freshmen in Congress. Those who were highly effective were more likely to seek higher office over the next decade, while those who were ineffective were more likely to leave Congress to try something other than lawmaking. This logic motivates our first testable hypothesis:

Lawmaking Effectiveness and Progressive Ambition Hypothesis: *More-effective state lawmakers are more likely to run for Congress than are less-effective state lawmakers.*

A second reason that we might see effective, rather than ineffective, state lawmakers in Congress is that voters reward the more effective state lawmakers in their primary and general elections. An extensive scholarly literature points to how most voters are not well-informed about their elected representatives' activities (e.g., Lupia 2015), especially as they pertain to the lawmaking process (e.g., Grimmer et al. 2014). However, lawmaking effectiveness might be considered a valence dimension that is generically appealing to voters, independent of their party affiliation and/or political ideology (i.e., Groseclose 2001, Wiseman 2006). On this point, recent scholarship by Butler et al. (forthcoming) demonstrates that, although voters are generally

uninformed about the lawmaking effectiveness of their Members of Congress, credible information about their Representatives' lawmaking effectiveness from an objective source significantly improves their opinions of their Representative – regardless of their political party. Moreover, Treul et al. (2022) demonstrate how primary voters, in particular, are more likely to vote for those House incumbents who are more effective lawmakers in Congress.

Taken together, these recent findings suggest that congressional primary and general electorates might weigh a state legislator's prior lawmaking effectiveness when deciding how to cast their ballots, motivating our second testable hypothesis:

Lawmaking Effectiveness and Electoral Victory Hypothesis*: More-effective state lawmakers are more likely to win their primary and general elections for seats in the U.S. House than are less-effective state lawmakers.*

These two hypotheses need not be in competition with one another. It is also plausible that more effective state lawmakers are more likely to serve in Congress because of a combination of these two factors: they are more likely to run for Congress *and* they are more likely to win their races conditional on running. Our analysis below is designed to disentangle these two plausible paths.

Data

Our first major research question is: Are more-effective state lawmakers more likely to serve in Congress than less-effective state lawmakers? If so, our secondary research questions, motivated by the above hypotheses are: Is the election of more effective state lawmakers to Congress driven largely by patterns of candidate entry, by the preferences (and decisions) of primary or general election voters, or by both of these factors combined? Engaging with these questions requires: metrics of lawmaker effectiveness for each state legislator, information

regarding which of them chose to run for the House (*entry*), and whether they ultimately won their primary and/or general elections for a House seat (*victory*).

Our metric of lawmaking effectiveness for state legislators is drawn from Bucchianeri, Volden, and Wiseman (2022), who generated nearly 80,000 state legislative effectiveness scores for legislators who served in 97 different state legislative chambers between 1987-2018. They employed a methodology analogous to that used in Volden and Wiseman's (2014) generation of Legislative Effectiveness Scores (LES) for the U.S. Congress.[1] More specifically, Bucchianeri, Volden, and Wiseman (2022) draw on publicly-available data to identify every bill that was introduced into every state legislature (other than Kansas), to match the bill to its primary sponsor, and to identify how far each bill went through each of five different status steps in the legislative process between introduction until (possibly) becoming law.[2] Each bill is coded as being commemorative, substantive, or substantive and significant; and then a State Legislative Effectiveness Score (SLES) is generated for each state legislator as a weighted average of these fifteen metrics (numbers of bills across five lawmaking stages and three levels of bill significance). Later lawmaking stages and more significant legislation are given greater weight. Similar to Volden and Wiseman's LES, each SLES is normalized to take a mean value of "1" within each chamber for legislative term (between elections). Hence, any state legislator whose SLES is greater than one is (by definition) above average in lawmaking effectiveness, in comparison to their peers; and those with lower scores are less effective.

[1] Bucchianeri, Volden, and Wiseman (2022) generate scores for every state legislature except for Kansas, where the prevailing legislative procedures do not allow analysts to identify which state legislator was the primary sponsor on bills introduced into the chamber. The authors are able to generate scores for each legislature up until the conclusion of its most recent session in 2017-2019 (depending on the chamber); the start date for the time series for each state's scores varies depending on the availability of electronically accessible state legislative records.
[2] Similar to Volden and Wiseman's analysis of Congress, Bucchianeri, Volden, and Wiseman only consider bills that, if enacted, will change existing state law.

Given the wide variation in legislative procedures and practices across state legislatures (e.g., Squire and Hamm 2005), it is somewhat inappropriate to compare the raw SLESs of legislators across different states and time. Rather, a more useful comparison is to consider how effective a state legislator was in comparison to a comparably positioned legislator (in terms of seniority and institutional positions) in the same chamber and the same legislative term. Bucchianeri, Volden, and Wiseman generate such a metric by first regressing a state legislator's SLES on a set of indicator variables for whether the lawmaker was in the majority party or held a committee chair, as well as the number of terms served in the state legislature (seniority) – all of which are expected to be positively correlated with lawmaking effectiveness. From these regression results, run separately by legislative chamber and term, they then generated a predicted SLES, which they denote as a state legislator's benchmark SLES, capturing the effectiveness of the average similarly-positioned state legislator in the chamber.

Any state legislator whose SLES exceeds her benchmark by at least 50% is then coded as being *above expectations* in lawmaking effectiveness, while any state legislator whose SLES is below 50% of her benchmark score is coded as being *below expectations*. (Those remaining legislators performing near their benchmark are denoted as *meeting expectations* in lawmaking effectiveness.)

To test our various hypotheses, we employ the lagged value of this variable, denoted *Lagged LES Relative to Expectations*, which captures whether a state legislator was below (1), met (2), or exceeded (3) expectations in her lawmaking effectiveness in the penultimate legislative session before facing any given opportunity to run for Congress. Such a lag removes any endogeneity that would be associated with those running for Congress paying differential attention to state lawmaking during such electoral competition. Similarly, for those who have

already left the state legislature, the lag removes any biases associated with those about to leave their offices focusing on other matters than lawmaking. These data allow us to employ a consistent and objective metric of lawmaking effectiveness for every state legislator in our dataset.[3]

To capture the overall movement from the state legislature to Congress, we create an indicator variable that takes a value of "1" if a given state legislator is elected to Congress in a given election and "zero" otherwise. Such an outcome can only occur if the legislator chooses to run and if voters support her candidacy. Because we are interested in both of these steps, we create dependent variables for each. To measure candidate entry, we create an indicator variable that takes a value of "1" if a state legislator ran for a seat in the U.S. House during any given opportunity, and "zero" otherwise.[4] To measure whether a candidate won her election(s), we create indicator variables taking a value of "1" if a state legislator won her primary or general election, conditional on running for Congress, and "zero" otherwise. In addition to these main dependent and independent variables of interest, we also account for a wide range of political and electoral variables that likely influence patterns of candidate entry and election outcomes.

A bit of a challenge arises in determining when and where state legislators find opportunities to run for Congress and therefore how best to construct the relevant set of

[3] While we have SLES data for several state legislatures beginning with the legislative sessions that correspond to the 1996 elections, legislators in several states do not enter our dataset until later years. More specifically, AR, IL, ND, NM, OH, SD, and UT enter the dataset in 1997. AL, CO, CT, HI, ID, IN, MT, and NY enter the dataset in 1999. FL, GA, KY, and WY enter the dataset in 2001. DE enters the dataset in 2003. NE, OR, and RI enters the dataset in 2007. And lawmakers from MA enter the dataset in 2009.

[4] Scholars studying progressive ambition and the decision to run for higher office have constructed samples of potential candidates in a variety of ways; and the particular samples depend in part on the outcome of interest. Because so few state legislators run for Congress, some scholars have drawn on survey data. For example, Fulton et al. (2006), Maestas et al. (2006), and Stone and Maisel (2003), as part of the *Candidate Emergence Study*, used surveys to study lawmakers' reported attraction to a congressional career, where the sample included state legislators whose districts overlapped with 200 randomly selected U.S. House districts in 41 states. Other research that examines variation in the actual decision to run typically draws on datasets of thousands of state legislators over time to ensure that there are enough runners in the sample to engage in meaningful empirical analyses. Our research design aligns with this latter approach.

independent variables. It is worth noting that state legislators enter congressional races more strategically than inexperienced candidates (Jacobson and Kernell 1983); and the most important factors that shape whether experienced candidates choose to run, and eventually win, are the presence of an incumbent, and the partisan tilt of the district (i.e., Canon 1993, Carson et al. 2007, Hirano and Snyder 2019, Jacobson and Kernell 1983). There are multiple ways to account for these factors empirically. One approach is to nest state legislators in a congressional district that they could have run in (given where their state legislative district was geographically situated), or the congressional district that they actually ran in, which occasionally does not overlap with their state legislative district (Aldrich and Thomsen 2017; Thomsen 2014, 2017). Nonrunners, in turn, would be nested in the congressional district that has the most overlap (in terms of population) with their state legislative district.

Another approach is to use indicator variables to denote the pool of potential candidates whose state legislative districts are geographically nested in the same congressional district, to examine patterns of entry among state legislators who are nested in the same congressional district (Phillips, Snyder, and Hall n.d.). In such an approach, state legislators are coded as being nested in a congressional district if some sizable portion of the voters in their state legislative districts are in the larger congressional district.[5] An advantage of the "pool-based" approach is that potential and actual candidates are compared to those in the same political and electoral context. A disadvantage with this approach, however, is that the sample is much smaller than the

[5] Approximately three-fourths of state legislators run in the congressional district that has the largest overlap with their state legislative district. Our sample also includes former state legislators who ran for Congress (i.e., they ran for a U.S. House seat after they left their state legislature); and 76% of these individuals those who ran from the congressional district that had the largest overlap with their (former) state legislative district. Approximately 12% who ran for Congress ran in a nested congressional district with less overlap; and the remaining 12% ran in congressional districts that had no overlap with their state legislative districts.

former approach, because there must be at least one state legislator who runs for higher office in each pool, for the congressional district to be included in the analysis.[6]

In our analysis below, we use the former "full sample" nesting rather than the latter "pool-based" approach in our main analysis, and we nest runners in the congressional district in which they actually ran. The results that we present below are substantively identical to what is obtained if we employ the pool-based approach.[7] In matching runners and non-runners to congressional districts for the full sample, we draw on Jacobson's presidential election return data to measure the partisan favorability of a particular district. More specifically, following Hirano and Snyder (2019), we code districts as *safe* if the candidate's party received more than 57.5% of the vote share in the previous or current presidential election, and *competitive* if the party received between 42.5% and 57.5% of the presidential vote. *Hopeless* districts are the baseline districts for comparison; and they are coded as such if the candidate's party received less than 42.5% of the presidential vote. In addition, we control for whether a House seat is open or incumbent-contested (where incumbent-contested races serve as the baselines for comparison). Ceteris paribus, we expect that state legislators are more likely to choose to run in open seats, and in safe or competitive districts, where their chances of winning are highest (i.e., Hirano and Snyder 2019; Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Thomsen 2014, 2017).

In addition to controlling for the competitiveness and partisan leanings of a given congressional district, we also control for several other political and electoral variables that likely influence the costs and benefits of running for office. First, we control for the number of state

[6] Some pool-based approaches also do not include those who ran in a congressional district with no overlap with their state legislative district, though this is not inherent to pool-based approaches (as runners can also be nested in the pool they ran in, regardless of whether it overlapped with their state legislative district). Approximately 10% of sitting state legislators who run for Congress ran in a congressional district that did not overlap with their state legislative district at all.

[7] In future drafts, we will show such similar results in the Supplemental Appendix.

legislators who sit in the same congressional district as the runner is nested in; we would expect that state legislators are less likely to run for Congress as the number of potential competitors (among other state legislators) increases. We also employ the Squire (1992, 2017) index, to account for significant differences in the scope of legislative professionalism across different state legislatures. Third, we control for whether a state legislator is term limited at the time that he or she chooses to run.[8] Finally, we draw on Bucchianeri, Volden, and Wiseman (2022) to control for a variety of institutional and personal characteristics of each state legislator, including a legislator's party (and whether the party held the chamber majority), gender, seniority, and whether the legislator held a committee chair and/or was seated on a power committee.[9] We also include year fixed effects to account for election-specific trends. For those cases where candidates are running for Congress, but are not simultaneously serving in the state legislature, we use the data on their personal and institutional circumstances that corresponded to the final and penultimate sessions that they served in the state legislature. Descriptive statistics for all variables in our analysis are provided in Appendix Table A1. We provide a brief discussion of the methods employed to validate our data at the end of the Supplemental Appendix.

Findings

We begin our analysis by identifying the extent to which there is a relationship between a state legislator's lawmaking effectiveness and whether he or she eventually serves in the U.S. House. We estimate a series of cross-sectional time-series logit regressions, where the dependent variable takes on a value of "1" if state legislator *i* was elected to the U.S. House in

[8] Legislators' term limit data were drawn from Fouirnaies and Hall (2022) and the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL).
[9] Bucchianeri, Volden and Wiseman (2022) code a committee as being a power committee if it engages with matters pertaining to budget, finance, appropriations, or rules.

time *t*. The sample consists of all state legislators in our dataset, including those who never ran for election to the House. Hence, our analysis represents an overview of the data, blurring together self-selection effects on the part of the candidates to run (or not run) for Congress as well as the selection effects on the part of voters to elect (or choose not to elect) more effective state lawmakers to the House. That said, analyzing the entire sample in this manner does allow us to ask and answer, in a very direct way: are more-effective state lawmakers more likely than less-effective state lawmakers to be chosen to serve in Congress?

As we can see from our results in Table 1, the answer to this question is a resounding "yes." In Model 1.1 we present the results from a simple bivariate logit regression, where we regress whether a state legislator was elected to the House onto the lawmaker's *Lagged SLES Relative to Expectations*.[10] The positive and statistically significant coefficient on *Lagged SLES Relative to Expectations* implies that those state legislators who met or exceeded their benchmark State Legislative Effectiveness Scores in the previous legislative session were more likely to be elected than those whose SLESs were below their benchmark scores. In other words, more effective state lawmakers are indeed more likely to be elected to the U.S. House.

[10] In all models, we account for the fact that many legislators had multiple opportunities to run for Congress (and are therefore in the dataset more than once) with robust standard errors, clustered by legislator.

Table 1: Effective State Lawmakers Are More Likely to Be Elected to Congress

	Model 1.1	Model 1.2	Model 1.3
Lagged SLES Relative to Expectations	*0.261***	*0.259***	
	(0.083)	*(0.100)*	
Lagged SLES Met Expectations			*0.444***
			(0.186)
Lagged SLES Above Expectations			*0.544***
			(0.223)
Open Seat		2.724**	2.724**
		(0.194)	(0.194)
Safe District		1.619**	1.615**
		(0.579)	(0.578)
Open Seat × Safe District		1.411**	1.410**
		(0.319)	(0.318)
Competitive District		2.518**	2.517**
		(0.511)	(0.511)
Number of State Legislators in District		-0.042**	-0.041**
		(0.011)	(0.011)
State Legislative Professionalism		1.856**	1.820**
		(0.545)	(0.543)
Legislator is Term Limited		0.734**	0.723**
		(0.168)	(0.168)
Female		0.022	0.021
		(0.153)	(0.153)
Republican		0.077	0.077
		(0.133)	(0.133)
In Majority Party in State Legislature		-0.265*	-0.269*
		(0.150)	(0.149)
Committee Chair		0.058	0.048
		(0.151)	(0.151)
Power Committee		0.244*	0.242*
		(0.131)	(0.131)
Seniority		-0.055	-0.053
		(0.074)	(0.074)
Seniority^2		-0.0001	-0.0001
		(0.0056)	(0.0056)
Constant	-5.906**	-9.049**	-8.893***
	(0.182)	(0.831)	(0.812)
N	59,202	57,179	57,179
Election-Year Fixed Effects	No	Yes	Yes
Pseudo R^2	0.002	0.269	0.270

Results are from logit regressions where the dependent variable is whether a state legislator was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, and the sample includes all state legislators during each election in which they could have run (including those who never ran for election to the House). Robust standard errors, clustered by legislator, are shown in parentheses. The results demonstrate that state legislators who have higher lagged Legislative Effectiveness Scores relative to expectations are more likely to be elected to the House.
*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, one-tailed.

In Model 1.2 we see that this result still holds upon controlling for many district and legislator characteristics, which we would expect to be correlated with the likelihood that a state legislator obtains higher office. Consistent with conventional wisdom, we see that state legislators are more likely to be elected to the House when they are not facing an incumbent (i.e., open seat competitions), and when the district is politically favorable to them with regards to relative partisan competitiveness. We also see, as indicated by the negative and statistically significant coefficient on *Number of State Legislators in District*, that any given state legislator is more likely to be elected to the House when they face fewer potential (high quality) competitors among other state legislators in the congressional district in which they are running; and they are also more likely to be elected if they are coming from more professionalized state legislatures (in which the state legislature operates more similarly to what they would find in Congress), as well as if they are being term limited out of office.

Interestingly, we see that several personal and institutional characteristics of a state legislator, such as gender, political party, seniority, and committee chair service, have relatively little impact on the likelihood of being ultimately elected to the House. That said, the results suggest that members of "power" committees are more likely to be elected, perhaps because they are able to leverage their powerful committee membership for enhanced campaign contributions and electioneering activities. We also see that members of the majority party are less likely to be elected, perhaps because they choose not to run for a House seat when they enjoy control within their state chambers and/or when voters hold them responsible for state policy outcomes in ways that inhibit their electoral successes.

In Model 1.3, we replicate the analysis in Model 1.2, but we recode our *Lagged SLES Relative to Expectations* variable into two categorical variables which take on a value of "1" if a

state legislator's Lagged SLES met (or, separately, exceeded) expectations in her penultimate legislative session, and "zero" otherwise. The baseline category for such variables in this model include those state legislators whose lagged SLES was below expectations relative to their benchmark scores. Comparing across specifications, we see that the findings in Models 1.2 and 1.3 are quite consistent, in that those state legislators whose lagged SLESs were above expectations were more likely to be elected to the House than those whose lagged SLESs were below expectations (and an analogous finding holds for those legislators whose lagged SLESs met expectations). In addition, we see that the magnitudes and statistical significance of the coefficients on the other independent variables are virtually identical across specifications.

The effect sizes on these variables of interest are substantial. Compared to a state legislator performing below expectations in lawmaking, one who meets expectations has a 56% greater odds of being elected to Congress.[11] And those exceeding expectations have a 72% greater odds of congressional service.[12] Although the probability of any given state legislator running for and being elected to Congress in any given election cycle is low, these relative odds accumulate substantially over time and across districts. Put another way, for the attractive case of an open seat in a safe district, the predicted probability of election to Congress by an ineffective state lawmaker is 1.56%, compared to 2.41% by an average lawmaker, and 2.66% by an effective lawmaker, all else equal.[13]

Taken together, these findings provide compelling support for the claim that more effective state lawmakers are more likely to end up in Congress than less effective state lawmakers. Exactly why this relationship holds, however, is an open question.

[11] The calculation involved here is $e^{0.444} = 1.56$, or a 56% increase in the odds ratio.
[12] The calculation involved here is $e^{0.544} = 1.72$, or a 72% increase in the odds ratio.
[13] In Appendix Table A2, we show these results to be largely robust to focusing on the raw Legislative Effectiveness Scores, rather than these values relative to expectations.

Turning to the supply-side component of electoral outcomes, in Table 2 we present the results from a series of cross-sectional time-series logit regression models, where the dependent variable takes on a value of "1" if state legislator *i* ran for the House in year *t*, and zero otherwise. The sample consists of all state legislators for whom we have Lagged SLES scores. Therefore, any given lawmaker may be in the dataset across multiple opportunities to choose to run, as accounted for through clustered standard errors on the models. In Models 2.1 and 2.2, the core independent variable of interest is state legislator *i*'s *Lagged SLES Relative to Expectations*; and in Model 2.3, the analogous independent variables are the *Lagged SLES Met Expectations* and *Lagged LES Above Expectations* indicator variables. Consistent with the *Lawmaking Effectiveness and Progressive Ambition Hypothesis*, we expect that the coefficients on these effectiveness variables to be positive and significant, indicating that more-effective state lawmakers are more likely than less-effective state lawmakers to run for Congress.

As demonstrated in the bivariate logit regression of Model 2.1, this is precisely the relationship that is obtained. The positive and statistically significant coefficient on *Lagged LES Relative to Expectations* implies that those legislators who were the most effective lawmakers in their state legislatures were the most likely to run for the House. Turning to Model 2.2, we see that this relationship still holds even when we control for a wide range of district characteristics, as well as various personal and institutional characteristics of the legislator. These control variables show the strategic elements of choosing to run for Congress: state legislators are more likely to run for Congress in open-seat contests especially in safe districts, for example. Perhaps unsurprisingly, we also see that state legislators are more likely to run for Congress when term limited out of office; and it appears that state legislators from more professional legislatures are more likely to run for the House.

Table 2: Effective State Lawmakers Are More Likely to Run for Congress

	Model 2.1	Model 2.2	Model 2.3
Lagged LES Relative to Expectations	*0.233***	*0.212***	
	(0.047)	*(0.055)*	
Lagged LES Met Expectations			*0.265***
			(0.094)
Lagged LES Above Expectations			*0.428***
			(0.113)
Open Seat		2.102**	2.101**
		(0.086)	(0.085)
Safe District		-0.090	-0.092
		(0.158)	(0.158)
Open Seat × Safe District		1.096**	1.096**
		(0.141)	(0.141)
Competitive District		0.698**	0.697**
		(0.120)	(0.120)
Number of State Legislators in District		-0.022**	-0.022**
		(0.003)	(0.003)
State Legislative Professionalism		1.056**	1.047**
		(0.303)	(0.302)
Legislator is Term Limited		1.047**	1.044**
		(0.093)	(0.093)
Female		0.109	0.108
		(0.084)	(0.084)
Republican		0.019	0.018
		(0.074)	(0.074)
In Majority Party in State Legislature		-0.162*	-0.164*
		(0.085)	(0.085)
Committee Chair		0.013	0.010
		(0.084)	(0.084)
Power Committee		0.076	0.076
		(0.072)	(0.072)
Seniority		-0.061	-0.060
		(0.044)	(0.044)
Seniority^2		-0.003	-0.003
		(0.003)	(0.003)
Constant	-4.479**	-5.164**	-4.980**
	(0.101)	(0.327)	(0.316)
N	59,202	57,179	57,179
Election-Year Fixed Effects	No	Yes	Yes
Pseudo R^2	0.002	0.197	0.197

Results are from logit regressions where the dependent variable is whether a state legislator ran for the U.S. House of Representatives, and the sample includes all state legislators during each election in which they could have run (including those who never ran for election to the House). Robust standard errors, clustered by legislator, are shown in parentheses. The results demonstrate that state legislators who have higher lagged Legislative Effectiveness Scores relative to expectations are more likely to run for Congress.
*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, one-tailed.

Apart from their lawmaking effectiveness, we see that very few of a legislator's personal or institutional circumstances seem to affect their likelihood of running for Congress. A legislator's gender, political party, seniority, and institutional position (with respect to holding a committee chair or being seated on a power committee) are not correlated with choosing to run for the House. One exception to this pattern, however, is the negative and statistically significant coefficient on *In Majority Party in State Legislature*, which implies that state legislators are less likely to run for the House when their party controls the chamber in which they sit. Combined with the preceding results from Table 1, this finding suggests that majority-party state legislators are less likely to serve in Congress because they are less likely to run for the House, all else equal, perhaps due to the perceived value of continuing to exert influence in their current position.

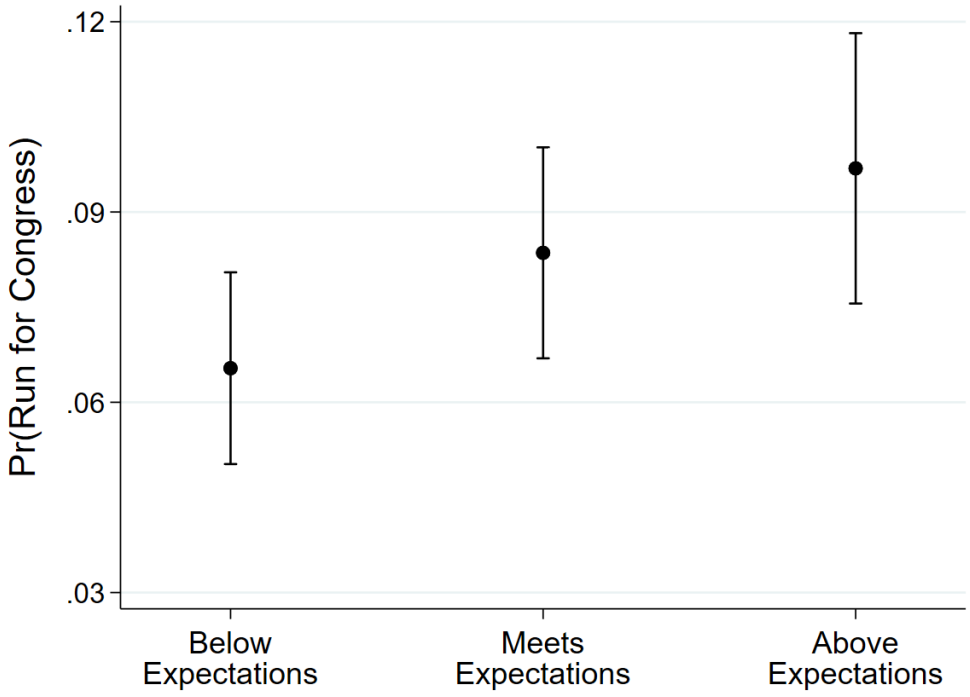
Model 2.3 includes separate controls for whether a state legislator met or exceeded expectations, revealing similar relationships to those identified in Models 2.1 and 2.2. The most effective state lawmakers (as indicated by the positive and statistically significant coefficient on *Lagged LES Above Expectations*) are most likely to run for the House, ceteris paribus.

The sizes of these effects are demonstrated in Figure 1, based on predicted values from Model 2.3 for the case of a safe, open seat. As the figure shows, under such fortuitous circumstances, ineffective state lawmakers (those below expectations relative to those in similar positions) seek a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives 6.5% of the time. In contrast, highly effective state lawmakers (above expectations), are much more likely to run – at a 9.7% frequency. Legislators who are average at lawmaking enter such races at an 8.4% rate.[14] Put

[14] Despite the overlapping confidence intervals between the "Below Expectations" and "Meets Expectations" categories, these differences are indeed statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), seen most easily because the point estimates for each lie outside of the confidence interval for the other.

another way, more-effective lawmakers are around a third to a half more likely to seek higher office than are less-effective state lawmakers.

Figure 1: Effective State Lawmakers Run for Congress More Frequently



Note: Predicted probabilities with 95% confidence intervals are constructed based on Model 2.3. The figure shows the probability of different types of state lawmakers running for Congress in the case of an open seat in a safe district, with all other control variables held at their means (or modes in the case of binary variables). Results reveal support for the *Lawmaking Effectiveness and Progressive Ambition Hypothesis*, with lawmakers performing above expectations being significantly more likely to run for Congress than are those performing below expectations (and with those meeting expectations being in the middle).

On the whole, these results provide substantial support for the *Lawmaking Effectiveness and Progressive Ambition Hypothesis*: effective lawmakers appear to appreciate their skills as legislators, and they seek to apply their skills within more prestigious venues as opportunities arise.[15] These results likewise help to explain the findings that were presented in Table 1. One

[15] In Appendix Table A3, we show these results to be robust to focusing on the raw Legislative Effectiveness Scores, rather than these values relative to expectations.

clear reason why more-effective state lawmakers are more likely to end up in Congress than less-effective state lawmakers is that they are more likely to *run* for Congress than are less-effective state lawmakers. The results in Table 2 do not, however, provide us with any insights as to whether voters favor more over less effective state lawmakers when evaluating potential candidates.

To engage directly with this final possibility, we turn to Table 3, where we present the results from a series of logit regressions, where the dependent variable takes on a value of "1" if legislator *i* won the primary (Models 3.1 and 3.2) or general (Models 3.3 and 3.4) election in year *t*, and zero otherwise. Hence, the sample differs from the sample analyzed in Table 1 in that rather than analyzing all state legislators regardless of whether they ran for Congress in a given election, a state legislator only enters the sample analyzed in Table 3 if he or she ran for Congress. Similar to the models that are presented in Table 2, in all models, the core independent variable of interest is state legislator *i*'s *Lagged SLES Relative to Expectations*. Consistent with the *Lawmaking Effectiveness and Electoral Victory Hypothesis*, we expect that the coefficients on *Lagged SLES Relative to Expectations* would be positive and significant, indicating that more effective state lawmakers are more likely to win their primary and general congressional elections than are less effective state lawmakers.

Table 3: Winning an Election Is Unrelated to Lawmaking Effectiveness

	Primary Election		General Election	
	Model 3.1	Model 3.2	Model 3.3	Model 3.4
Lagged SLES Relative to Expectations	*0.077*	*0.071*	*0.048*	*0.119*
	(0.104)	*(0.114)*	*(0.114)*	*(0.125)*
Open Seat		-0.513**		0.792**
		(0.188)		(0.226)
Safe District		-2.637**		1.790**
		(0.335)		(0.605)
Open Seat × Safe District		1.277**		0.543
		(0.314)		(0.370)
Competitive District		-0.894**		2.012**
		(0.264)		(0.530)
Number of State Legislators in District		-0.020**		-0.022*
		(0.006)		(0.010)
State Legislative Professionalism		0.172		0.906
		(0.593)		(0.652)
Legislator is Term Limited		-0.513**		-0.148
		(0.184)		(0.210)
Female		-0.048		-0.087
		(0.166)		(0.183)
Republican		-0.015		0.067
		(0.149)		(0.162)
In Majority Party in State Legislature		-0.172		-0.172
		(0.161)		(0.178)
Committee Chair		0.020		0.038
		(0.171)		(0.186)
Power Committee		0.387**		0.224
		(0.142)		(0.158)
Seniority		-0.084		-0.038
		(0.103)		(0.116)
Seniority^2		0.008		0.006
		(0.008)		(0.008)
Constant	-0.054	1.925**	-1.158**	-3.613**
	(0.226)	(0.675)	(0.246)	(0.947)
N	1,041	1,039	1,045	1,043
Election-Year Fixed Effects	No	Yes	No	Yes
Pseudo R^2	0.000	0.118	0.000	0.105

Results are from logit regressions where the dependent variable is whether a state legislator won her primary or general election for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, and the sample includes all state legislators who ran for the House. Robust standard errors, clustered by legislator, are shown in parentheses. The results demonstrate that there is essentially no relationship between a state legislator's lawmaking effectiveness and whether she won her race for a House seat conditional on becoming a candidate.
*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, one-tailed.

Focusing on Models 3.1 and 3.3, presenting the results from simple bivariate logit regressions, we see that the coefficients on *Lagged SLES Relative to Expectations* are positive, yet statistically indistinguishable from zero. Turning to the richer specifications in Models 3.2 and 3.4, we see that a similar result obtains: the coefficients on *Lagged LES Relative to Expectations*, while positive, both fail to obtain statistical significance. Hence, we are unable to reject the null hypothesis that there is essentially no relationship between the lawmaking effectiveness of a state legislator and the likelihood of winning the primary or general election to serve in the House. The same null findings are obtained if we break out *Lagged SLES Relative to Expectations* into the categories *Lagged LES Met Expectations* and *Lagged LES Above Expectations*, as we do in Tables 1 and 2 above, or if we use the raw State Legislative Effectiveness Scores rather than those relative to expectations. Regardless of whether the contest is a primary or general election, voters are not clearly choosing candidates based on their demonstrated lawmaking effectiveness, all else equal.

Taken together, these findings are consistent with broader theoretical arguments and empirical findings about the lack of a meaningful accountability relationship between voters and their elected officials (e.g., Achen and Bartels 2016, Lupia 2015), especially as it pertains to legislative politics and outcomes. While lawmaking effectiveness could plausibly serve as a valence consideration that influences voters' choices, this appears not to be the case when focusing on state legislators who are running for higher office. Either voters simply don't care about a state legislator's prior lawmaking effectiveness, or such information has not been presented to them in a compelling manner so as to influence their decisions, or both are true.[16] In any event, one main implication of our findings is that the extent to which we see more highly-

[16] Butler et al. (n.d.) attempt to disentangle these two possibilities through the analysis of survey experiments of voters regarding incumbent members of the U.S. House of Representatives.

effective state lawmakers being elected to Congress than less-effective state lawmakers has little to do with expressed voter preferences for lawmaking effectiveness *per se*; rather, highly effective state lawmakers are simply more likely than ineffective lawmakers to step forward and accept the challenge of competing for a congressional seat. Voters are not demanding effective lawmakers, but the larger supply of effective state lawmakers still makes them likely to end up in Congress relative to their less effective counterparts.

Implications and Conclusion

One of the benefits of American federalism is the possibility of states serving as laboratories of democracy. For public policies, this means the opportunity to experiment with various approaches, abandoning policy failures and spreading successes to other states or upward to the nation as a whole. For politicians, this means offering state-level experience at lawmaking, ideally with the most effective performers continuing their service as they move from the states to the national level. While the scholarly work on policy diffusion is immense, we here offer the first systematic test of the diffusion of effective lawmakers from the state to the national level.

Relying on new scores for the lawmaking effectiveness of members of state legislatures, we find strong evidence that those who are highly effective are about fifty percent more likely to enter Congress than are those who are ineffective. Most of this effect seems to result from self-selection, with highly effective lawmakers being much more likely to seek higher office than are less-effective lawmakers. Although there may be a slight electoral advantage for effective lawmakers, the effects based on analyses conditional upon running for office show neither sizable nor statistically significant support from voters for effective over ineffective lawmakers as candidates.

In sum, these patterns suggest that, for American federalism to serve the purpose of leading the most effective politicians to higher office, recruitment and selection is highly important. Relying on voters to be discerning in terms of the selection of effective lawmakers is not likely to be sufficient, at least not without offering them better information about the lawmaking effectiveness of state officials seeking higher office. More work could be done in exploring whether and how such information provision might change voting outcomes. One possibility is that voters today, as mentioned in the introduction, are highly supportive of "outsider" candidates (Hansen and Treul 2021). If voters are not viewing state legislators as "outsiders," either because they are seen as experienced politicians, or because the candidates themselves do not do a good job of branding themselves as such, it could be affecting the electoral success of the effective state legislators.

More could also be done to understand the conditions under which effective or ineffective lawmakers stay in their state legislature or seek higher office. The broad patterns identified here could mask conditional effects, such as effective lawmakers being particularly opportunistic in waiting for open seats or especially likely to build on their experiences in the majority party, as committee chairs, or in other leadership roles.

In addition to the findings put forth here, it will be important for future researchers to examine the transferability of effective lawmaking skills from the state to the national level. Are effective state lawmakers likely to be more effective once they reach Congress? Are such effects conditional on state legislatures mimicking Congress in terms of professionalism? Are there other institutional differences that allow for some states to become even better training grounds than others for effective lawmaking in Congress?

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Table A1: Descriptive Statistics, Variable Definitions, and Sources

Variable	Description	Mean	Std. Dev.
Lagged SLES Relative to Expectations[a]	1 = Below Expectations, 2 = Met Expectations, 3 = Exceeded Expectations; described in text	1.923	0.674
Elected[b]	1 = Elected to U.S. House, 0 = otherwise	0.005	0.067
Ran for Congress[b]	1 = Ran for U.S. House 0 = otherwise	0.028	0.132
Won Primary Election[b]	1 = Won Primary Election, 0 = otherwise	0.525	0.500
Won General Election[b]	1= Won General Election, 0 = otherwise	0.257	0.437
Open Seat[b]	1 = Open House Seat, 0 = otherwise	0.124	0.329
Competitive District[b]	1 = Competitive District, 0 = otherwise; described in text	0.463	0.499
Number of State Legislators in District[b]	Total number of state legislators whose districts are geographically situated in CD	24.612	27.659
State Legislative Professionalism[d]	Squire Index	0.204	0.123
Term Limited[c]	1 = Legislator is Term Limited, 0 = otherwise	0.068	0.251
Female[a]	1 = Legislator is Female, 0 = otherwise	0.228	0.420
Republican[a]	1 = Legislator is Republican, 0 = otherwise	0.498	0.500
In Majority Party in State Legislature[a]	1 = Legislator's Party Controls Majority of State Legislative Chamber, 0 = otherwise	0.613	0.487
Committee Chair[a]	1 = Legislator is Committee Chair, 0 = otherwise	0.313	0.464
Power Committee[a]	1 = Legislator serves on a committee related to the budget, finance, appropriations, or rules	0.489	0.500
Seniority[a]	Number of consecutive terms served by member in Chamber	4.454	3.213

Sources:
[a]Bucchianeri, Volden, and Wiseman (2022)
[b]Thomsen (2017)
[c]Fouirnaies and Hall (2022) and the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL)
[d]Squire (1992, 2017)

Table A2: Elected to Congress Results Robust to Using Lagged SLES Variable

	Model A2.1	Model A2.2
Lagged SLES	0.052*	0.105**
	(0.030)	(0.038)
Open Seat		2.726**
		(0.194)
Safe District		1.665**
		(0.575)
Open Seat × Safe District		1.385**
		(0.313)
Competitive District		2.518**
		(0.511)
Number of State Legislators in District		-0.043**
		(0.011)
State Legislative Professionalism		1.815**
		(0.544)
Legislator is Term Limited		0.714**
		(0.169)
Female		0.015
		(0.152)
Republican		0.060
		(0.132)
In Majority Party in State Legislature		-0.288*
		(0.147)
Committee Chair		0.036
		(0.151)
Power Committee		0.215*
		(0.130)
Seniority		-0.038
		(0.073)
Seniority^2		-0.001
		(0.006)
Constant	-5.454**	-8.650**
	(0.071)	(0.808)
N	60,672	58,274
Election-Year Fixed Effects	No	Yes
Pseudo R^2	0.000	0.267

Results are from logit regressions where the dependent variable is whether a state legislator was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, and the sample includes all state legislators during each election in which they could have run (including those who never ran for election to the House). Robust standard errors, clustered by legislator, are shown in parentheses. The results demonstrate that state legislators who have higher lagged Legislative Effectiveness Scores are more likely to be elected to the House.
*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, one-tailed.

Table A3: Running for Congress Results Robust to Using Lagged SLES Variable

	Model A3.1	Model A3.2
Lagged LES	0.054**	0.112**
	(0.018)	(0.022)
Open Seat		2.105**
		(0.085)
Safe District		-0.080
		(0.157)
Open Seat × Safe District		1.092**
		(0.140)
Competitive District		0.700**
		(0.119)
Number of State Legislators in District		-0.022**
		(0.003)
State Legislative Professionalism		1.056**
		(0.302)
Legislator is Term Limited		1.032**
		(0.093)
Female		0.097
		(0.084)
Republican		0.018
		(0.073)
In Majority Party in State Legislature		-0.216**
		(0.084)
Committee Chair		-0.006
		(0.084)
Power Committee		0.082
		(0.072)
Seniority		-0.052
		(0.044)
Seniority^2		-0.004
		(0.003)
Constant	-4.089**	-4.758**
	(0.039)	(0.299)
N	60,672	58,274
Election-Year Fixed Effects	No	Yes
Pseudo R^2	0.001	0.196

Results are from logit regressions where the dependent variable is whether a state legislator ran for the U.S. House of Representatives, and the sample includes all state legislators during each election in which they could have run (including those who never ran for election to the House). Robust standard errors, clustered by legislator, are shown in parentheses. The results demonstrate that state legislators who have higher lagged Legislative Effectiveness Scores are more likely to run for Congress.
*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, one-tailed.

Further Data Validation

To validate our data, we used Thomsen's (2022) data of congressional candidates to benchmark our sample of runners against the full universe of state legislators who ran for Congress during this period to ensure that the totals match as closely as possible. There are approximately 1,560 former or sitting state legislators who ran for the U.S. House in either a regular or special election in the states and years covered by the SLES data. Our sample includes 1,191 of these candidates: approximately 77 percent of the universe of runners with state legislative experience. The remaining 23 percent of the candidates held state legislative office in the years prior to the data collection, and thus do not have SLES scores. We include former and sitting state legislators because the size of the sample decreases significantly if only sitting state legislators are included in our analysis. Of the 1,191 candidates in our sample, 915 of them were sitting state legislators at the time that they ran (77% of the size of our sample and 59% of the universe of candidates with state legislative experience).

We can additionally examine the coverage of our sample by comparing the total number of general election winners with state legislative backgrounds during this period to the total number of general election winners in our dataset. Our dataset includes 307 general election winners out of a total of 324 general election winners with state legislative experience during this period of time: 95% of all former and current state lawmakers who entered Congress. While we are unable to include those who held state legislative office prior to the years covered in the SLES dataset, but we included as many state lawmakers as possible and sought to ensure that they map as closely as possible onto the universe of runners.