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978-0-521-76152-9 - Legislative Effectiveness in the United States Congress: The Lawmakers

Craig Volden and Alan E. Wiseman

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Legislative Effectiveness in the United States Congress

The Lawmakers

This book explores why some members of Congress are more effective than others at navigating the legislative process and what such differences imply for how Congress is organized and what policies it produces. Craig Volden and Alan E. Wiseman develop a new metric of individual lawmaker effectiveness (the Legislative Effectiveness Score) that will be of interest to scholars, voters, and politicians alike. They use these scores to study party influence, the successes or failures of women and African Americans in Congress, policy gridlock, and the specific strategies that lawmakers employ to advance their agendas.

Craig Volden is Professor of Public Policy and Politics, with appointments in the Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy and the Woodrow Wilson Department of Politics at the University of Virginia. He has published numerous articles in such journals as the *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *Journal of Politics*, *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, *Journal of Law, Economics & Organization*, and *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*. Volden is a coauthor (with David W. Brady) of *Revolving Gridlock: Politics and Policy from Jimmy Carter to George W. Bush* (2006).

Alan E. Wiseman is Associate Professor of Political Science, with a secondary appointment in Law at Vanderbilt University. He has published numerous articles in peer-reviewed journals such as the *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *Journal of Politics*, *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, and *Journal of Theoretical Politics*. He is the author of *The Internet Economy: Access, Taxes, and Market Structure* (2000).

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For more on the Legislative Effectiveness Project, and to browse the Legislative Effectiveness Scores for all Representatives in Congress, see www.thelawmakers.org. Check back often for updates.

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Acknowledgments

As detailed in the pages of our book, effective lawmaking requires both perseverance and collaboration. To the extent that we ourselves have been effective in undertaking this scholarly endeavor, the same two traits have been essential.

In terms of perseverance, the origins of this project date back to October 2006 when we were both members of the political science faculty at The Ohio State University. Our offices were around the corner from each other on the second floor of Derby Hall, and we had lunch together nearly every day to discuss research, classes, politics, and far less important matters. Having come from the same graduate program in the Stanford University Graduate School of Business, we often saw political science research through similar lenses, and had each built early careers by entering into scholarly debates and attempting to advance them with new theoretical models and empirical investigations.

What had mostly escaped us, however, was the degree to which the political science field had fallen largely silent on many important issues of the day. Our discussions eventually came to the topic of overcoming policy gridlock, with the question of which specific lawmakers can “get things done” in Congress. The topic was both sufficiently ignored within political science and sufficiently intriguing to us, such that we began to dive into in-depth conversations about how we could systematically detect the most effective members of Congress and use those measures to better understand the workings of Congress itself and the nature of the public policies it produces.

That is when the need for perseverance began. Developing a series of computer programs to collect all the information on bill sponsorship in the House of Representatives and convert such raw data into easily interpretable and useful measures was itself a multi-year project. Analysis and writing followed, albeit with happy interruptions for the births and infancy of children (one for Alan and two for Craig) and with relocations (Alan to Vanderbilt and Craig to Virginia). While each such event delayed the move to completion, they also served to improve the final product. Sleep-deprived nights lead not only to crazy ideas

that are nonsensical but also to crazy ideas that turn out to be valuable. Meeting new colleagues and teaching new classes not only takes time but also opens up different and valuable perspectives on how best to present new ideas to diverse audiences.

Along the journey, we built up numerous debts to colleagues, research assistants, students, friends, and family, which we can only partially repay by finally acknowledging them here. It is here that the collaborative nature of lawmaking is mimicked by the collaborative work needed for our scholarly endeavor.

As we were writing, we distributed chapters widely, as soon as we felt that they were sufficiently polished, to a collection of scholars who we hoped would provide us with some feedback regarding our approach, our characterizations of the extant literatures, and (what they deemed to be) our major findings. It is always a bit of a gamble circulating draft chapters to as many as thirty people, as one never knows how many, if any, will have a sufficiently flexible schedule (and find the topic of sufficient interest) to take the time to read and offer genuinely constructive feedback on the materials they have received. On this point, however, we were not disappointed. We think that it is fair to say that the legislative studies community sets a pretty high bar for its general collegiality and willingness to offer constructive criticism of their colleagues' work. (In fact, one of our colleagues has, in the past, compared the annual legislative studies section at the APSA meetings to "a family reunion ... but one where the family members actually like one another.") If the scope and depth of responses that we received from our colleagues are any indication, the tradition of collegiality and constructive feedback is definitely alive and well among contemporary scholars of legislative politics.

Over the past several years, we have received particularly constructive written and oral feedback on various aspects of the project from numerous colleagues including Claire Abernathy, Scott Adler, John Aldrich, Mike Bailey, Larry Bartels, Jim Battista, Larry Baum, Paul Beck, Bill Bendix, Ken Benoit, Chris Berry, Janet Boles, Jan Box-Steffensmeier, David Brady, Barry Burden, Dan Butler, Greg Caldeira, David Canon, Cliff Carrubba, Jamie Carson, Josh Clinton, Joshua Cohen, Gerry Connolly, Kimberly Beth Cowell-Meyers, Gary Cox, Kathy Dolan, Jamie Druckman, Diana Evans, Mo Fiorina, Juanita Firestone, Gerald Gamm, John Geer, John Griffin, Jacob Hacker, Rick Hall, Kerry Haynie, Alex Hirsch, Matt Hitt, John Hudak, Molly Jackman, Jeff Jenkins, Bill Keech, Luke Keele, Keith Krehbiel, Chris Kypriotis, Dave Lewis, Tony Madonna, Lauren Mattioli, Nolan McCarty, Sid Milkis, William Minozzi, Mike Neblo, Eric Patashnik, John Patty, Kathryn Pearson, Carl Pinkele, Keith Poole, Beth Reingold, Rip Ripley, Jason Roberts, Dave Rohde, Kira Sanbonmatsu, Lynn Sanders, Wendy Schiller, Ken Shepsle, Chuck Shipan, Ken Shotts, Barbara Sinclair, Betsy Sinclair, Theda Skocpol, Steve Smith, Jed Stiglitz, Tracy Sulkin, Michele Swers, Andrew Taylor, Sean Theriault, Sophie Trawalter, Rick Valelly, Georg Vanberg, Denise Walsh, Gerry Warburg, Greg Wawro, John Wilkerson, and Jack Wright. In addition to these colleagues who

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Along the way, we published initial findings from the Legislative Effectiveness Project in a variety of venues. Portions of Chapter 2 were originally published in an essay entitled “Legislative Effectiveness and Representation” in the 10th edition of *Congress Reconsidered* (eds. Larry Dodd and Bruce Oppenheimer, 2012), and we appreciate CQ Press’s willingness to let us incorporate materials from that essay into this book. Chapter 4 draws on material from an article entitled “When Are Women More Effective Lawmakers Than Men?” which was coauthored with Dana E. Wittmer and published in the *American Journal of Political Science* (2013), and we appreciate Wiley Press’s willingness to let us incorporate materials from that article into this book. Additionally, some of the material in Chapter 5 is drawn from an earlier essay entitled “Breaking Gridlock: The Determinants of Health Policy Change in Congress” that was published in 2011 in the *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law*, and we appreciate Duke University Press’s willingness to allow us to incorporate materials from that essay into this book.

We also thank James Austrow, Maddie Bergner, Zach Blackburn, Tracy Burdett, Ken Gillette, Matt Hitt, Chris Kypriotis, Katy Lai, Lauren Mattioli, Brian Pokosh, Rachel Schneider, and Nicholas Zeppos, Jr., for outstanding research assistance at various stages of the project. Moreover, Claire Abernathy deserves special praise, as her enthusiastic research support was instrumental in

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Alan also greatly appreciates the help and support he received from his colleagues at The Ohio State University, where this project began, and the constant encouragement, feedback, and prodding from Jack Wright, in particular, who challenged, and continues to challenge, him in his various research pursuits. Moving away from Ohio State, he is grateful to the Vanderbilt community, and especially thankful to Josh Clinton, Carolyn Dever, John Geer, David Lewis, Bruce Oppenheimer, and Chancellor Nick Zeppos for helping bring him to Vanderbilt University; and he appreciates the professional and personal support he has received at Vanderbilt, including in the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, which helped make this work notably stronger than what might have been obtained if he hadn't joined the Vanderbilt family. Since arriving at Vanderbilt, he has also benefited from the friendship of Cindy Kam and Robert Mikos (and Charlotte and Henry), who have gone out of their way to welcome him and the rest of his family to Nashville; and he greatly appreciates the feedback and support from Tracey George, whose enthusiasm for this project has proved to be infectious at times.

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We wrote this book for four main audiences with four overlapping goals. First, for academic scholars of the U.S. Congress, we hope that this work will draw their attention to new and intriguing findings regarding the lawmaking process, which will stimulate further empirical and theoretical scholarship on the ways in which individual lawmakers, when faced with various institutional constraints, create policy. Second, for students of American politics, both graduate and undergraduate, we're hopeful that the findings in this book pique their interest about the workings of the U.S. Congress (and especially the effectiveness of congressional lawmakers), such that they pursue these topics in further scholarly inquiries, becoming the next generation of legislative scholars. Third, for journalists, political commentators, and readers interested broadly in American politics, we hope that the findings in this book complement and extend their understandings of the contemporary lawmaking process.

Finally, for American voters and citizens at large, we hope that a renewed focus on the effectiveness of our representatives helps turn our politics away from polarized and partisan deadlock and toward demands to confront the major problems faced by our nation, and that citizens will increasingly support those leaders who are willing and able to overcome those differences and actually get things done in Washington once again. We hope to stimulate a broad discussion about what it means to be an effective lawmaker and to facilitate a greater appreciation for those whose perseverance and collaborative efforts do not merely pass policy problems off to future generations. In this respect, we wrote this book for our own children, who are themselves just learning to read, in the hopes that our own peculiar efforts will in some small way help leave them a better world. It is to them that we dedicate this book.