CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Are Workers Effective Lawmakers?

Jacob M. Lollis 🔘

Department of Politics, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA, USA
Email: jml7hf@virginia.edu

## Abstract

Are workers effective lawmakers? Throughout American history, some politicians and elites have argued that white-collar Americans are more qualified than working-class Americans to govern. To date, however, we know relatively little about the legislative effectiveness of working-class lawmakers. I develop a theory of class-based electoral selection that links class-based discrimination in elections to legislators' performance in office. I argue that working-class candidates face class-based biases in elections that make it more difficult to emerge and successfully win elective office. As a result, I expect the working-class candidates who do become lawmakers to be equally or more effective than their white-collar colleagues. To test these expectations, I create a data set merging the occupational background of more than 14,000 individual state legislators with their state legislative effectiveness score (SLES). The resulting data set includes more than 50,000 state legislator-term specific observations. Consistent with my expectations, I find that working-class lawmakers do not underperform white-collar lawmakers. Further, I provide evidence that, across various models and specifications, the gap between working-class and white-collar legislators' effectiveness is negligible.

## Introduction

Approximately half of US citizens are employed in manual labor or service-based jobs, yet only 6% of state legislators and 2% of US representatives have previously been employed in a working-class occupation (Carnes 2013). The effects of America's white-collar government are clear—wealth inequality has dramatically increased in the last half-century with the top 1% of Americans becoming increasingly wealthy while workers' wage earnings have stagnated. Scholars find that US policy advantages the rich while ignoring the interests of working-class and poor Americans (Bartels 2016; Gilens 2012; Miler 2018; Persson and Sundell 2023).[1] One potential reason that

---

[1]A debate exists among scholars as to whether affluent and poor Americans' policy preferences differ and whether poor Americans lack political representation. See Gilens (2009) for a review.

policy reflects the interests of the rich is the drastic overrepresentation of wealthy Americans serving in political office (Carnes 2013).

The primary explanation for why workers are underrepresented in American legislatures is that structural biases exist in American elections that prevent working-class candidates from emerging and successfully running for elected office (Carnes 2018). While a growing literature examines how and why American elections disproportionately disadvantage candidates from a working-class background (Carnes 2018; Treul and Hansen 2023), it is also necessary to consider how class-based electoral bias is related to workers' ability to effectively govern. The current literature suggests that if workers' numerical representation in legislatures increases, better policy representation for working-class Americans will likely follow (Carnes 2013, 2018; Mansbridge 1999). And based on the policy priorities of working-class lawmakers this appears to be true—working-class legislators are more likely than white-collar legislators to introduce and vote for pro-worker policies (Carnes 2013). This logic, however, is contingent on the assumption that workers perform equally or better than white-collar lawmakers once elected to legislative office. If workers are ineffective lawmakers, their policy preferences are unlikely to be successfully legislated into law. In this article, I examine whether a class-based effectiveness gap exists in American legislatures.

Throughout America's history, some political leaders have advanced arguments suggesting that, if elected, working-class lawmakers would be ineffective at carrying out the duties and responsibilities of a legislator. Alexander Hamilton, writing in the Federalist Papers, suggests that workers are less politically skilled than individuals working in white-collar jobs and are, therefore, less suitable for political office (Hamilton et al. 1788). More recently, President Trump publicly stated in reference to his selection of cabinet secretaries that he preferred to appoint rich cabinet secretaries because he "just didn't want a poor person" in the position (Calfas 2017). If these arguments are correct and white-collar lawmakers are better suited to govern, we may expect working-class legislators to be less effective lawmakers than their white-collar colleagues. To date, however, there is no empirical evidence suggesting that working-class legislators are less effective lawmakers than white-collar legislators.

I argue, in contrast, that working-class legislators should perform equally or better than white-collar lawmakers. I develop a theory of class-based electoral selection that links class-based discrimination in elections to legislators' performance in office (Anzia and Berry 2011). Working-class candidates face class-based biases in elections that make it more difficult to emerge and successfully win elective office (Carnes 2018). Given that white-collar candidates do not face similar biases in elections, working-class candidates must work harder and develop skills to overcome these barriers. As a result, the workers who do win elected office are qualified, hard-working candidates capable of effective lawmaking.

My data set pairs pre-legislature occupational data for more than 14,000 unique state legislators (Makse 2019) with Bucchianeri, Volden, and Wiseman's (2024) state legislative effectiveness scores (SLES). The data set in total includes more than 50,000 legislator-term specific observations from 49 states for more than 30 years (1988–2017). Of these 50,000 legislator-term specific observations, approximately 3,500 are working-class legislators. A simple comparison of means shows that, on average, white-collar legislators are marginally more effective than working-class legislators. However, in a regression model with controls, this

relationship disappears, suggesting that working-class and white-collar legislators are equally effective lawmakers.

Studying legislators' performance in office, particularly for underrepresented groups, is necessary for several reasons. First, empirically evaluating the legislative effectiveness of underrepresented groups empowers scholars to address discriminatory arguments that these groups are in some way less capable than majority groups. My analysis provides some evidence against these discriminatory arguments; I find no evidence that white-collar legislators are more effective lawmakers than workers. Indeed, my findings stand in contrast to arguments that suggest workers are less suitable for political office because of their occupational background (Hamilton et al. 1788). Second, examining the effectiveness of working-class lawmakers may have implications for the substantive representation of working-class Americans. Though I do not directly test whether working-class lawmakers are more likely to pass legislation that would benefit working-class constituents, the fact that workers are equally as effective as white-collar lawmakers certainly suggests that workers have the lawmaking skills necessary to substantively represent working-class Americans.

## The legislative effectiveness of underrepresented groups

There is an extensive literature that seeks to conceptualize, measure, and analyze legislative effectiveness in the US Congress and US state legislatures (Bucchianeri, Volden, and Wiseman 2024; Hitt, Volden, and Wiseman 2017; Matthews 1959; Stacy 2020; Volden and Wiseman 2014, 2018; Volden, Wiseman, and Wittmer 2013; Weissert 1991). Volden and Wiseman define legislative effectiveness as "the proven ability to advance a member's agenda items through the legislative process and into law" (Volden and Wiseman 2014, p. 18). Bucchianeri, Volden, and Wiseman's (2024) SLES measure legislative action throughout the lawmaking process (sponsorship, action in committee, action beyond committee, a bill passing one chamber, and a bill becoming law). This measure comprehensively describes legislators' lawmaking efforts at each stage of the lawmaking process. Legislative effectiveness scores are used to analyze institutional and individual-level factors, and how the intersection of both, shapes legislators' effectiveness. Scholars have primarily analyzed the legislative effectiveness of two underrepresented groups—women and Black legislators—in the US Congress (Volden and Wiseman 2014; Volden, Wiseman, and Wittmer 2013).

Volden and Wiseman (2014) find that women legislators, when in the minority party, are more effective than male legislators. In the majority party, however, women are equally effective as male legislators (Volden, Wiseman, and Wittmer 2013). Women legislators are particularly effective at the consensus-building portions of the lawmaking process such as committee and floor action (Volden and Wiseman 2014; Volden, Wiseman, and Wittmer 2013). Volden et al. attribute women's increased effectiveness at consensus-building stages of the legislative process to behavioral differences between genders—women are more collaborative than their male colleagues (Volden, Wiseman, and Wittmer 2013).[2]

---

[2]In contrast, Lawless, Theriault, and Guthrie (2018) argue that female legislators are more likely than male legislators to engage in activities that foster collegiality and collaboration. However, their behavior within the legislative process is not distinct from that of male legislators.

Black legislators are less effective than White legislators when Democrats are in the majority party. However, they are equally as effective as White legislators when Democrats are in the minority party (Volden and Wiseman 2014). Volden and Wiseman (2014) theorize that this is a result of Black legislators developing a more specialized legislative agenda. Existing scholarship on the legislative effectiveness of women and Black legislators suggests that underrepresented groups are not uniformly less effective than majority groups. Instead, their effectiveness is uniquely shaped by the interaction between legislative institutions and their descriptive identities. Therefore, while considering the legislative effectiveness of women and Black legislators may be theoretically useful, workers' effectiveness will likely be, in part, unique.

There is limited scholarship directly analyzing the relationship between legislators' social class backgrounds and their performance in legislatures. While no existing work uses legislative effectiveness scores (Bucchianeri, Volden, and Wiseman 2024; Volden and Wiseman 2014) to analyze how legislators' social class backgrounds are related to their legislative effectiveness, scholars have used other measures of legislative productivity. The findings are mixed among the existing literature but broadly suggest that working-class legislators are not uniformly less effective than white-collar legislators. Carnes, in his book *White-Collar Government* (Carnes 2013), examines the legislative entrepreneurship of workers in the US Congress in the context of economic policy. He finds that workers sponsor and cosponsor more economic legislation than white-collar legislators, and pass economic policy at equal rates as their white-collar colleagues.[3] Likewise, Carnes and Lupu (2016b) examine the relationship between legislators' educational backgrounds and their performance in office and find that legislators pass the same number of bills regardless of their educational background. Finally, in an examination of underrepresented groups in state legislative leadership positions, Hansen and Clark (2020) find that workers are equally as likely to be represented in state leadership positions as white-collar legislators. While state legislative leadership positions are not a direct test of legislators' effectiveness, existing work suggests that legislative leaders are among the most effective lawmakers (Volden and Wiseman 2014).

I provide a more robust analysis of class-based legislative effectiveness in two ways. First, using SLES allows me to define legislative effectiveness as a lawmaker's effectiveness at all stages of the legislative process rather than only sponsorship, cosponsorship, or final passage votes. Importantly, this allows me to observe workers' actions at less visible stages of the lawmaking process such as actions in committee and on the floor. Second, I analyze state legislators rather than US representatives, where only 2% of representatives have previously been employed in working-class occupations (Carnes 2013). I conduct my analyses at the state legislature level because the percentage of working-class representation is higher than in the US Congress (6% rather than 2%). Additionally, given that there are far more state legislators than US representatives, the raw number of working-class representatives is much higher, offering more variation in levels of representation across time to examine.

---

[3]In contrast, Stacy (2020) examines the relationship between legislators' personal wealth and their effectiveness and finds that the most wealthy legislators have a higher legislative effectiveness score than the least wealthy legislators.

## Class-based electoral bias and legislative effectiveness

I argue that working-class lawmakers are equally or more effective than white-collar lawmakers due to class-based electoral selection effects. Building on existing work, I develop a theory of class-based electoral selection that links class-based discrimination in elections to legislators' performance in office (Anzia and Berry 2011). This theory suggests that because workers face prejudice and discrimination during legislative elections as a result of their class identity, they are forced to work harder and develop the necessary skills to win elections. As a result, the working-class candidates who win elections become effective lawmakers.[4]

Electoral selection effects occur when political candidates face biases in elections as a result of their identity (Anzia and Berry 2011; Ashworth, Berry, and de Mesquita 2024). Existing research suggests that women, non-white, working-class, and LGBTQ+ candidates disproportionately face electoral obstacles that increase the difficulty of winning elections (Anzia and Berry 2011; Bateson 2020; Carnes 2018; Piston 2010; Wagner 2019). As a result, candidates from underrepresented groups must work harder than majority groups to win elections. There are at least three causes of electoral selection effects (Anzia and Berry 2011; Ashworth, Berry, and de Mesquita 2024). First, voters may be biased toward a given social group, requiring that candidates who identify with these groups be exceptionally qualified to secure electoral support. Second, candidates may perceive that voters are biased against them, even if they are not. If this is the case, only the most ambitious and qualified candidates will emerge and enter the electoral arena. Third, political elites and gatekeepers may be biased against certain social groups, forcing candidates who identify with these groups to work harder to gain elite support during their campaigns.

Existing scholarship suggests that the type of selection effects candidates face varies across identity groups.[5] Prejudice and discrimination from political elites and gatekeepers—rather than voter bias or perceived bias—is likely the primary obstacle preventing working-class candidates from winning elections (Carnes and Lupu 2016a; Carnes 2018; Griffin, Newman, and Buhr 2020; Hoyt and DeShields 2021; Treul and Hansen 2023). Evidence from survey experiments suggests that voters are not biased against working-class candidates relative to white-collar candidates. Carnes and Lupu (2016a) find that respondents in the United States, Britain, and Argentina viewed hypothetical working-class candidates as "equally qualified, more relatable, and just as likely to get their votes" (Carnes and Lupu 2016a, p. 832). Other work suggests that voters rate workers as more "warm" relative to white-collar candidates (Hoyt and DeShields 2021). On the other hand, voters rate white-collar candidates as less honest and less caring than working-class candidates (Griffin,

---

[4]My theoretical argument is not suggesting that positive selection effects in elections do not occur. Rather, I build on existing literature suggesting that working-class candidates face electoral discrimination (Carnes 2018) and argue that both positive selection effects and electoral discrimination are occurring in elections. As a result, when positive selection effects are mixed with electoral discrimination, workers not only have to be equally as good as white-collar candidates to win elections (positive selection argument), they have to be better (positive selection effects and electoral discrimination) (Anzia and Berry 2011).

[5]For example, Anzia and Berry (2011) argue that women candidates perceive and experience sexism within congressional elections and, as a result, perform better than their male colleagues to overcome this discrimination. More recent work also suggests that sex-based selection leads to women lawmakers being more effective than their male counterparts (Ashworth, Berry, and de Mesquita 2024).

Newman, and Buhr 2020). Likewise, working-class candidates do not see themselves as unqualified for elected office. When asked whether they had ever thought about running for elected office, working-class respondents reported a similar level of political ambition as white-collar respondents (Carnes 2018). Similarly, working-class Americans are equally as likely to feel qualified to run for office as white-collar Americans (Carnes 2018).

Workers do experience discrimination during campaigns from political elites and electoral gatekeepers. Carnes (2018) finds that party leaders view the working class as less viable political candidates, often citing their difficulty to fundraise and win elections (Carnes 2018, p. 110). As a result, party leaders are less likely to recruit and support working-class candidates in legislative races. Relatedly, without the financial support of party leaders, working-class candidates struggle to fundraise in elections.[6] This dual resource and recruitment burden makes it extremely difficult for workers to enter the electoral arena, and even more difficult to win the race.

As a result of class-based discrimination, working-class candidates and white-collar candidates experience a very different electoral environment (Carnes 2018). Working-class candidates must work harder than white-collar candidates to receive the same electoral outcome (Carnes 2018). In doing so, I argue that workers develop and refine skills that promote effective lawmaking once in office (Anzia and Berry 2011). To date, there is little work directly testing mechanisms that may explain why electoral selection effects produce effective lawmakers (Anzia and Berry 2011). I suggest two plausible mechanisms that may explain why class-based electoral selection produces effective working-class lawmakers.

First, one way class-based electoral selection may produce effective lawmakers is that less qualified working-class candidates will lose elections. Working-class lawmakers who do not overcome class-based electoral barriers—whether it be because they were not qualified candidates or because the electoral barriers were insurmountable—will lose their election. Given that white-collar candidates face fewer electoral obstacles than working-class candidates, they may be more likely to win elections even if they are less qualified than working-class candidates. Workers' performance in primary versus general elections lend some evidence in support of this expectation. Treul and Hansen (2023) find that workers underperform white-collar candidates in primary elections; however, workers are equally as likely as white-collar candidates to win general elections (Carnes 2018). One explanation for this seemingly inconsistent trend may be that less qualified working-class candidates are weeded out during primary elections, while qualified workers perform equally as well as their white-collar opponents in general elections. This selection process results in only the most effective working-class candidates winning elections and gaining representation in legislatures.

Second, in addition to hollowing out the working-class candidate pool, I expect class-based biases in elections to meaningfully influence the working-class candidates who do win elections. The working-class candidates who do successfully win elections have experienced the effects of class bias in elections, and are aware of the effort that is required to outperform their white-collar colleagues. There is reason to expect that workers will carry this over-performance mindset with them as they begin

---

[6]For example, Carnes (2018) finds that workers are less likely to win electoral office in districts that run more expensive electoral races (p. 135).

working in legislatures. Put differently, class-based biases exist within American political institutions, and so similar to the electoral stage of the political process, workers must work harder than their white-collar colleagues in legislatures to accomplish their goals (Carnes 2013, 2018).

Working-class candidates face electoral biases that white-collar candidates do not face. The result of this electoral selection effect is that only the most qualified and capable workers win elected office and gain representation in legislatures. As a result, I hypothesize that working-class lawmakers should be equally or more qualified than their white-collar colleagues.

**H1 (Class-Based Legislative Effectiveness)**: Workers are equally or more effective lawmakers than white-collar legislators.

## Data and measurement

To test this hypothesis, I pair pre-legislature occupational data for more than 14,000 unique state legislators (Makse 2019) with Bucchianeri, Volden, and Wiseman's (2024) SLES. The data set includes SLES for 51,929 legislator-term-specific observations for 49 states from 1987–2017.[7] Of these observations, 3,572 (or 6.8% of my sample) were previously employed in a working-class occupation.[8]

SLES are constructed similarly to legislative effective scores (LES) used to measure effectiveness in the US Congress (Volden and Wiseman 2014; Volden, Wiseman, and Wittmer 2013). SLES, like LES, captures the weighted average of a legislator's actions throughout five stages of the lawmaking process: bill introduction, action in committee (AIC), action beyond committee (ABC), passing one chamber (PASS), and becoming law (LAW) (Bucchianeri, Volden, and Wiseman 2024). Therefore, these scores evaluate effectiveness throughout the entirety of the legislative process rather than simply analyzing roll-call votes. Additionally, SLES are weighted to reflect the substance and significance of legislation. Commemorative and symbolic legislation influences a legislator's effectiveness score less than substantive and significant legislation. Bucchinaeri, Volden, and Wiseman (2024) calculated SLES by scraping the legislative history of every bill available on state legislative websites. Bill data are available for some states (Maine, South Carolina, New Hampshire, Texas, and Pennsylvania) dating back to the 1980s. The legislative history of every bill for every state (except Kansas) is included in the data set after 2003.[9]

To operationalize social class, I use pre-legislature occupational data (Makse 2019). I consider legislators to be working-class if their most recent pre-legislature occupation was in construction, office or clerical work, public safety, retail and service, a skilled trade, or as semi-skilled or unskilled laborers. My definition of workers most closely resembles Makse's (2019) definition; however, unlike Makse, I do not consider "transportation professions" which include pilots, railroad engineers, and air traffic controllers to be working-class. My definition of working class differs from Carnes' (2013) definition in that I consider contractors engaged in blue-collar

---

[7]SLES for four states appear in the data set post-2003: Massachusetts (2009), Nebraska (2007), Oregon (2007), and Rhode Island (2007). SLES do not exist for Kansas due to insufficient data.

[8]See Figure 4.1 in Supplementary Appendix A.4.

[9]See the Supplemetary Appendix (A.2) and Bucchianeri, Volden, and Wiseman (2024) for a more detailed explanation of how SLES scores are calculated.

work and public safety professionals to be working-class. I use the occupational backgrounds of legislators to operationalize social class because it is arguably the best predictor of individuals' income and social status (Matthews 1954; Hout 2008, cited in Carnes 2012), and it has become convention in the study of social class (Barnes, Beall, and Holman 2021; Carnes 2013; Makse 2019; Nickelson and Jansa 2023). A complete list of working-class and white-collar occupations can be found in the Supplementary Appendix (A.1).

One downside of Makse's (2019) occupational data is that lawmakers' occupational histories are limited to their most recent pre-legislature occupation. If a lawmaker's most recent occupation before being elected is in real estate, they are coded as white-collar. Conversely, if a lawmaker's most recent occupation prior to being elected is a retail worker, they are coded as working-class. This data cannot distinguish legislators who worked in a working-class occupation prior to working in a white-collar occupation. For example, a legislator who worked as a retail worker for 5 years before transitioning into a job in real estate is coded as white-collar. Ideally, I would have complete occupational histories for every state legislator. I would then be able to analyze how legislators' occupational histories influenced their effectiveness within legislatures. Perhaps legislators who entered the workforce as working-class but transitioned into a white-collar job have a higher or lower effectiveness score than legislators who entered the workforce in a working-class job and remained in a working-class job until their election.

Unfortunately, a data set including the occupational histories of state legislators from all state legislatures across the time series of my data does not exist.[10] While this is a limitation within my data, I argue that defining a legislators' social class by their most recent pre-legislature occupation is a reasonable test for my theory. I argue that working-class lawmakers should be equally or more effective than white-collar lawmakers because of class-based biases in elections. These biases will likely be most pronounced for working-class lawmakers currently employed in a working-class occupation during their campaign (rather than a formerly working-class candidate employed in a white-collar occupation during their campaign). For example, given that party leaders discriminate against the working class when recruiting potential candidates, this discrimination will be most pronounced for working-class candidates who are currently employed in a working-class occupation rather than candidates who were previously employed in a working-class occupation. Thus, if class-based electoral selection effects influence working-class and white-collar legislators' effectiveness differently, this effect will be most pronounced for candidates whose most recent occupation was a working-class job. Therefore, while operationalizing legislators' social class as their most recent pre-legislature occupation does not comprehensively describe their occupational history, it is a reasonable test for my theory.

I condition on several covariates that likely influence legislators' effectiveness. First, I control for the percentage of working-class legislators within a legislature term to ensure that the estimated relationship is not dependent on the proportion of workers represented within a legislature. Second, given that legislators hold multiple social group identities that could confound the relationship between social class and

---

[10]Hansen and Clark's (2020) data set includes the occupational histories of state legislators, but for only thirty state legislatures across twelve years. The time series of the Makse (2019) data set better approximated the time series of the SLES.
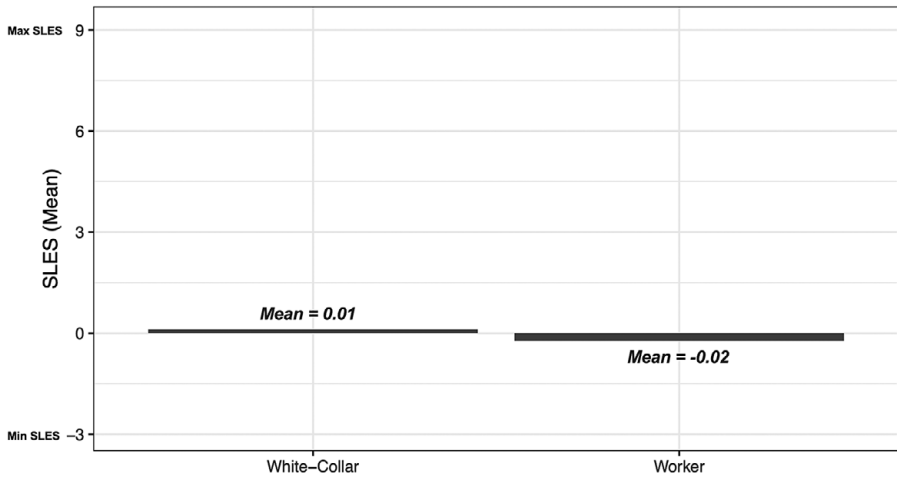
**Figure 1.** Average SLES of Working-Class and White-Collar Legislators.

legislative effectiveness, I control for demographic covariates such as race, gender, and party identification.[11] Third, I include chamber-specific covariates that differ between legislators, such as seniority, vote share, majority party status, governor's party, leadership positions, and polarization. Fourth, I control for covariates that differ across state legislatures such as professional and term limits. Finally, I include state and term fixed effects to control for variation specific to each state legislature and term.[12]

## Are workers effective lawmakers?

I first analyze the mean effectiveness score of white-collar and working-class state legislators. Figure 1 plots the mean SLES for both white-collar and working-class legislators. White-collar legislators, on average, have a mean SLES of .01. Working-class legislators, on average, have a mean SLES of −.02. After plotting the average effectiveness score for both white-collar and working-class legislators against the entire range of the dependent variable (−3 to 9), it becomes clear that a class-based effectiveness gap of 0.03 in the raw data is substantively small.

The substantively small difference in means between working-class and white-collar legislators' effectiveness entirely disappears in a regression model. I estimate ordinary least square (OLS) regression models with "Worker" as the independent variable and "SLES" as the dependent variable. As column 6 in Table 1 shows, all else equal, workers are, on average, 0.028 times less effective than white-collar legislators. However, the magnitude of the relationship is small and not

---

[11]Barnes, Beall, and Holman (2021) have argued that pink-collar workers—female workers—are theoretically and empirically distinct from blue-collar workers. I investigate whether gender moderates workers' effectiveness and find that the interaction term is statistically indistinguishable from zero, suggesting that a worker's gender does not influence their legislative effectiveness (see Supplementary Appendix A.4).

[12]Descriptive statistics for the variables of interest are presented in Supplementary Appendix A.3.

**Table 1.** Working-class and white-collar legislators are equally effective lawmakers

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | BILL | AIC | ABC | PASS | LAW | SLES |
| Worker | 0.000248 | 0.0000188 | 0.000223 | 0.000492 | 0.000539 | −0.0284 |
| | (0.57) | (0.04) | (0.47) | (0.95) | (0.97) | (−1.07) |
| % Worker | −0.00130<***> | −0.00113<**> | −0.00105<**> | −0.00113<**> | −0.00111<*> | 0.0141 |
| | (−3.53) | (−2.99) | (−2.93) | (−2.87) | (−2.56) | (0.45) |
| Female | −0.0000376 | 0.000543 | 0.000655<*> | 0.000748<**> | 0.000851<**> | 0.0108 |
| | (−0.15) | (1.96) | (2.40) | (2.68) | (2.80) | (0.67) |
| Black | −0.00275<*> | −0.00332<**> | −0.00300<*> | −0.00279<*> | −0.00238 | 0.0551 |
| | (−2.29) | (−2.67) | (−2.37) | (−2.19) | (−1.57) | (0.79) |
| Hispanic | −0.000689 | −0.00127 | −0.000825 | −0.000743 | −0.000489 | 0.167<*> |
| | (−0.63) | (−1.09) | (−0.69) | (−0.61) | (−0.35) | (2.40) |
| Race (other) | −0.00162 | −0.00157 | −0.00141 | −0.00552<**> | −0.00612<**> | −0.0790 |
| | (−0.65) | (−0.71) | (−0.60) | (−2.78) | (−3.04) | (−0.62) |
| White | −0.00166 | −0.00203 | −0.00174 | −0.00165 | −0.00126 | 0.144<*> |
| | (−1.64) | (−1.89) | (−1.59) | (−1.51) | (−0.98) | (2.52) |
| Democrat | 0.000279 | −0.000760<***> | −0.000807<***> | −0.000927<***> | −0.000938<***> | −0.0237 |
| | (1.28) | (−3.30) | (−3.41) | (−3.82) | (−3.59) | (−1.71) |
| Seniority | 0.0000867 | 0.0000750 | 0.0000692 | 0.0000578 | 0.0000979 | 0.0211<***> |
| | (1.87) | (1.58) | (1.46) | (1.23) | (1.92) | (6.95) |
| Committee Chair | 0.00561<***> | 0.00746<***> | 0.00844<***> | 0.00885<***> | 0.00883<***> | 0.513<***> |
| | (23.98) | (27.77) | (29.50) | (29.59) | (26.68) | (30.38) |
| In majority | 0.00236<***> | 0.00428<***> | 0.00468<***> | 0.00495<***> | 0.00434<***> | 0.355<***> |
| | (9.37) | (14.99) | (16.02) | (18.62) | (15.01) | (20.30) |
| Governor same party | 0.000590<***> | 0.000747<***> | 0.000643<**> | 0.000762<***> | 0.00124<***> | 0.0341<**> |
| | (3.44) | (4.06) | (3.25) | (3.82) | (5.83) | (3.04) |
| Majority leadership | 0.00296<***> | 0.00411<***> | 0.00510<***> | 0.00563<***> | 0.00580<***> | 0.179<***> |
| | (4.47) | (5.60) | (6.39) | (6.96) | (6.94) | (4.78) |
| Minority leadership | 0.00251<**> | 0.00211<*> | 0.00172 | 0.000628 | 0.000440 | 0.107<**> |
| | (3.21) | (2.17) | (1.72) | (0.97) | (0.63) | (2.92) |
| Polarization | −0.000213 | −0.00131<***> | −0.00213<***> | −0.00236<***> | −0.00270<***> | −0.175<***> |
| | (−0.88) | (−4.74) | (−7.46) | (−10.53) | (−11.32) | (−11.06) |
| Leader, speaker, president | 0.0000528 | 0.00101 | 0.00173 | 0.00297<*> | 0.00407<*> | −0.0370 |
| | (0.05) | (0.79) | (1.24) | (1.97) | (2.36) | (−0.55) |

(Continued)

**Table 1.**  (*Continued*)

|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Term limits | 0.00148<***> | 0.00162<***> | 0.00180<***> | 0.00179<***> | 0.00194<***> | 0.114<***> |
|  | (5.57) | (5.99) | (6.20) | (5.87) | (6.00) | (6.75) |
| Professionalism (squire) | −0.00815<***> | −0.00759<***> | −0.00757<***> | −0.00761<***> | −0.00743<***> | −0.102 |
|  | (−11.04) | (−9.89) | (−9.85) | (−9.54) | (−8.42) | (−1.81) |
| Vote share | −0.00192<***> | −0.00192<***> | −0.00179<***> | −0.00142<**> | −0.00146<**> | 0.0382 |
|  | (−4.63) | (−3.83) | (−3.39) | (−2.75) | (−2.58) | (1.31) |
| Senate | 0.0142<***> | 0.0135<***> | 0.0131<***> | 0.0132<***> | 0.0131<***> | −0.164<***> |
|  | (46.70) | (43.22) | (40.87) | (40.47) | (37.74) | (−10.10) |
| Intercept | 0.00698<*> | 0.00729<*> | 0.00659<*> | 0.00669<*> | 0.00629 | −0.331 |
|  | (2.30) | (2.33) | (2.17) | (2.08) | (1.77) | (−1.40) |
| State fixed effects | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Term fixed effects | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| N | 48220 | 48220 | 48220 | 48220 | 48220 | 48220 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.30 | 0.30 | 0.30 | 0.30 | 0.26 | 0.18 |

Notes: *t* statistics in parentheses.
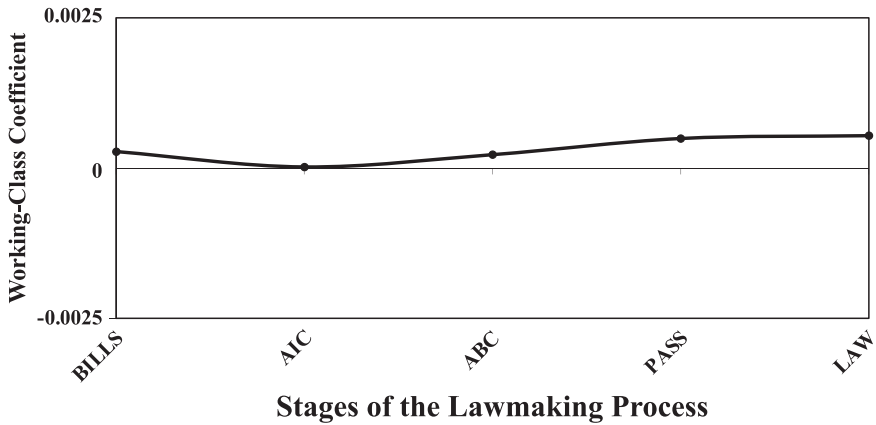<*>$p < 0.05$, <**>$p < 0.01$, <***>$p < 0.001$.

**Figure 2.** Working-Class and White-Collar Legislators Are Equally Effective Lawmakers.

statistically significant.[13] The dependent variable ranges from −2.9 to 9.9, indicating that an effectiveness gap of 0.028 is substantively small. Put differently, the difference in working-class and white-collar lawmakers' effectiveness is approximately 2.8% of a standard deviation.

I also estimate workers' effectiveness at each stage of the lawmaking process. Table 1 (columns 1–5) shows that the worker coefficient is positive, though small in magnitude and not statistically significant at each of the five stages of the lawmaking process. Figure 2 displays the effectiveness gap between working-class and white-collar legislators at each stage of the lawmaking process—bill introduction, action in committee (AIC), action beyond committee (ABC), passing chamber (PASS), and becoming law (LAW). A point estimate greater than zero indicates that workers are more effective than white-collar legislators. Likewise, a point estimate below zero indicates that white-collar lawmakers are more effective than working-class legislators. To observe any variation away from zero, the *Y*-axis must be set to a substantively small range (0.0025 to −0.0025) of the dependent variable, suggesting no meaningful difference between working-class and white-collar legislators'

---

[13]One concern regarding the model estimated in Table 1 may be that the data are structured in a way that creates a two-level model—the data set includes multiple observations for each legislator (given that the unit of analysis is legislator-term observations), and while the occupational background of the legislator is static for each observation, legislators' effectiveness scores are dynamic. To address this, I estimate a model including only observations from a legislator's first term in office. Given that legislators will only have one occupational observation in this model, the two-level data structure becomes a one-level data structure. The results are presented in A.5 (Table 5.2). The results are similar to the results presented in Table 1. Working-class lawmakers are no less effective than white-collar lawmakers, and the error estimates are precisely estimated. The results in Table 5.2 in Supplementary Appendix, however, may not be generalizable to all legislators if white-collar or working-class legislators disproportionately become more (or less) effective throughout their legislative careers. To test whether this is the case, I interact the dichotomous worker variable with a seniority variable, which measures the number of terms legislators have served in a given chamber. The results from Table 5.3 (in Supplementary Appendix A.5) suggest that while legislators do become slightly more effective throughout their legislative career, working-class and white-collar lawmakers experience this effectiveness boost equally. Collectively, the results from Tables 5.2 and 5.3 in the Supplemetary Appendix suggest that the multi-level structure of the data is not meaningfully changing the observed results.

effectiveness. Importantly, the absence of a class-based effectiveness gap is independent of workers' numerical representation in the legislature. Working-class lawmakers are equally as effective as white-collar lawmakers regardless of the percentage of workers represented in the legislature. This relationship also holds in various state legislative institutional arrangements.[14] The evidence from Figure 2 and Table 1 is consistent with my expectation that workers are no less effective than white-collar lawmakers.

A relationship between a set of variables that is not statistically significant, however, does not necessarily have a negligible effect (Rainey 2014). A regression coefficient may be statistically indistinguishable from zero for reasons other than the absence of a relationship between a set of variables. For example, a small sample size can result in large error estimates that might make a large coefficient not statistically significant (Rainey 2014). To ensure that the effectiveness gap between working-class and white-collar lawmakers is indeed negligible, I follow the advice of Rainey (2014) and (1) define a contextually specific negligible legislative effectiveness score (−m and m) and (2) use a 90% confidence interval to examine whether the estimated confidence interval falls within the zone of negligibility (−m and m).[15]

I define the zone of negligibility as an effect that ranges between −0.075 and 0.075. It is important to carefully define how I selected this range. Rainey (2014) advises that scholars define negligibility in a way that is contextually specific to their data. This means that scholars are tasked with evaluating their data and determining at what level effects are no longer substantively meaningful (Rainey 2014). The SLES variable ranges from −2.9 to 9.9. Therefore, an effect (and error estimates) that falls within the range of −0.075 and 0.075 is only 15% of a standard deviation. I argue that an effect that falls within this range does not meaningfully explain any variation in legislators' effectiveness. Put differently, if two lawmakers' SLES differ by only 0.075, on average, their actions in all five stages of the lawmaking process look very similar. I plot estimates and their confidence intervals and analyze whether they fall within this zone (−0.075 and 0.075). If the 90% confidence intervals fall within the zone of negligibility, this suggests that the null results indicate a negligible effect (Rainey 2014).

Figures 3 and 4 plot the estimated relationship between legislators' class backgrounds and their effectiveness using clustered standard errors, bootstrapped standard errors, and median regression.[16] The solid black line labeled "estimate" is the estimated relationship in row one, column six of Table 1. Given that state legislative data is

---

[14]See Table 5.1 in Supplementary Appendix A.5 that displays the moderating effect of state legislative institutions and the percentage of workers in the legislature on class-based legislative effectiveness. The professionalization of the legislature does not meaningfully moderate the relationship between social class and legislative effectiveness. Similarly, workers are equally as effective as white-collar legislators in states with and without term limits. Finally, the percentage of workers in a legislature does not meaningfully moderate class-based legislative effectiveness.

[15]It is important to note that a 90% confidence interval is a harder test of whether the difference between working-class and white-collar legislators' effectiveness is indeed negligible than a 95% confidence interval. Given that this approach considers whether any meaningful variation in the dependent variable occurs within the range of the inverted confidence interval, considering a "wider" 90% confidence interval rather than a more "narrow" 95% confidence interval provides a harder test of the negligible result.

[16]Two of the estimated models—the clustered standard error and the bootstrapped standard error—closely approach the negative bound of the negligibility zone. The zone of negligibility was defined prior to plotting the estimates for each of these models. Though the lower bound of the confidence interval for these models approaches the lower bound of the zone of negligibility, the observed relationship still remains within the zone of negligibility.
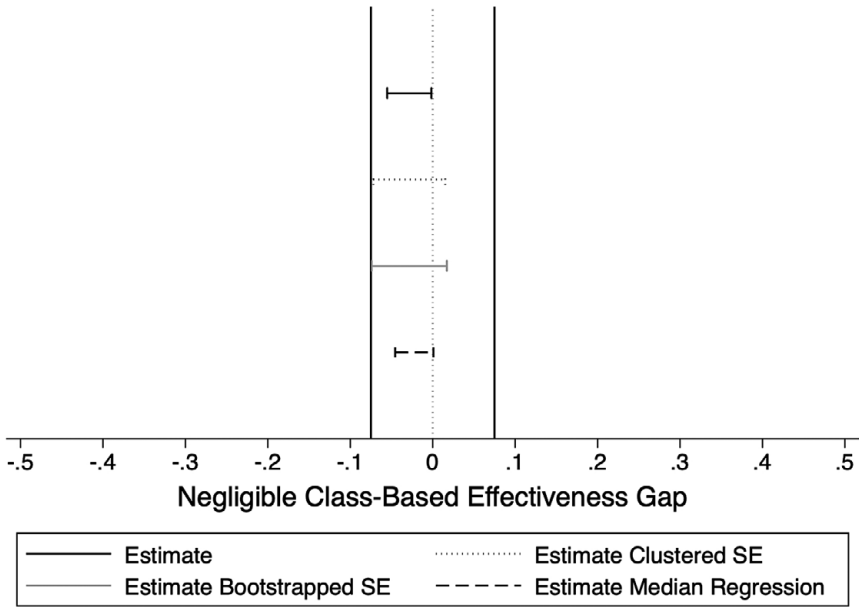
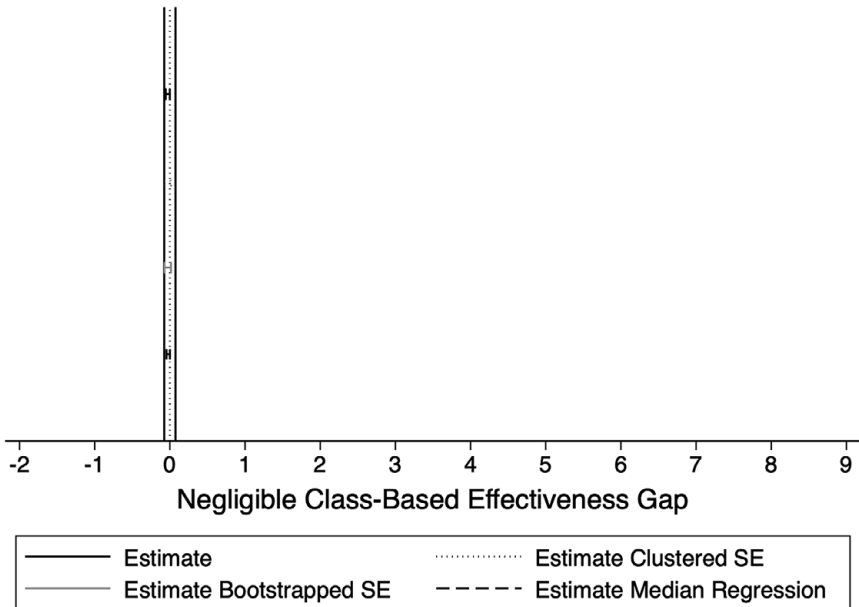**Figure 3.** Negligible Class-Based Effectiveness Gap.



**Figure 4.** Negligible Class-Based Effectiveness Gap Across Entire Range of SLES.

particularly likely to have clustered groups and heavy-tailed distributions, I replicate my results using clustered and bootstrapped standard errors and median regression. I use clustered standard errors and bootstrapped standard errors to ensure that the grouped nature of the data does not produce unmodeled correlations that result in a downward bias in standard error estimates (Harden 2011). Additionally, I replicate the OLS results using median regression to ensure that the heavy-tailed error term does not produce inefficient estimates (Harden and Desmarais 2011).

Figure 3 shows that all four estimates and confidence intervals are similar in magnitude and fall within the zone of negligibility. This means that, across four different models, the 90% confidence intervals only include estimates within the zone of negligibility. To better contextualize the negligible relationship between legislators' class background and their effectiveness, Figure 4 plots the same data as Figure 3 over the entire range of the SLES variable. Figures 3 and 4 collectively show that the absence of a class-based effectiveness gap is precisely estimated and negligible when considering the range of the dependent variable.

To further clarify the precision of the null effect, the lower bound of the 90% confidence interval for the worker coefficient is less than 1% of the range of the SLES variable. Even more striking, the largest possible value of the worker coefficient is less than 1% of the committee chair coefficient, which is the largest coefficient observed in the model. Therefore, consistent with the findings in Table 1, I conclude that there is no meaningful gap between working-class and white-collar legislators' effectiveness in my sample. These findings support my expectation that workers will be no less effective lawmakers than white-collar legislators.

## Conclusion

Political elites have long argued that, if elected, working-class politicians would be less effective at governing than white-collar politicians (Hamilton et al. 1788; Calfas 2017). I analyze the legislative effectiveness of 14,000 state legislators and find no evidence that working-class legislators are less effective lawmakers than white-collar legislators. Indeed, I provide evidence of a negligible relationship between working-class and white-collar legislators' effectiveness. White-collar and working-class legislators are equally effective throughout each stage of the lawmaking process.

I argue that workers perform equally as well as white-collar legislators once in office because they face class-based discrimination in elections. Class-based electoral biases create incentives for working-class candidates to work harder—both in terms of effort and skill development—than white-collar candidates. As a result, less qualified working-class candidates lose elections and the workers who do win elective office are effective lawmakers.

Future research should continue to explore the legislative behavior of working-class lawmakers. Two future directions are particularly relevant in light of the findings reported in this paper. First, scholars should examine the policy areas in which working-class lawmakers are most effective.[17] If workers prioritize labor and economic policy, we can be more confident that the descriptive representation of working-class lawmakers leads to the substantive representation of workers' policy preferences (Carnes 2013). Second, future work should consider whether workers'

---

[17]This analysis is not currently possible given that SLES has not yet been expanded to include policy issue area scores.

effective lawmaking is related to their performance in elections. If effective working-class lawmakers are electorally rewarded for their legislative performance, this may suggest that working-class lawmakers' performance in office is not a primary cause of the numeric underrepresentation of working-class lawmakers.

# References

Anzia, Sarah F., and Christopher R. Berry. 2011. "The Jackie (and Jill) Robinson Effect: Why Do Congresswomen Outperform Congressmen?" *American Journal of Political Science* 55 (3): 478–93.

Ashworth, Scott, Christopher R. Berry, and Ethan Bueno de Mesquita. 2024. "Modeling Theories of Women's Underrepresentation in Elections." *American Journal of Political Science* 68 (1): 289–303.

Barnes, Tiffany D., Victoria D. Beall, and Mirya R. Holman. 2021. "Pink-Collar Representation and Budgetary Outcomes in US States." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 46 (1): 119–54.

Bartels, Larry M. 2016. *Unequal Democracy*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Bateson, Regina. 2020. "Strategic discrimination." *Perspectives on Politics* 18 (4): 1068–87.

Bucchianeri, Peter, Craig Volden, and Alan E. Wiseman. 2024. "Legislative Effectiveness in the American States." *American Political Science Review* 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055424000042.

Calfas, Jennifer. 2017. "President Trump Says He Doesn't Want a 'Poor Person' in Cabinet Role." *Time.*

Carnes, Nicholas. 2012. "Does the Numerical Underrepresentation of the Working Class in Congress Matter?" *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 37 (1): 5–34.

Carnes, Nicholas. 2013. *White-Collar Government: The Hidden Role of Class in Economic Policy Making*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Carnes, Nicholas. 2018. *The Cash Ceiling*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Carnes, Nicholas, and Noam Lupu. 2016a. "Do Voters Dislike Working-Class Candidates? Voter Biases and the Descriptive Underrepresentation of the Working Class." *American Political Science Review* 110 (4): 832–44.

Carnes, Nicholas, and Noam Lupu. 2016b. "What Good is a College Degree? Education and Leader Quality Reconsidered." *Journal of Politics* 78 (1): 35–49.

Gilens, Martin. 2009. "Preference Gaps and Inequality in Representation." *Political Science & Politics* 42 (2): 335–41.

Gilens, Martin. 2012. *Affluence and Influence*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Griffin, John D., Brian Newman, and Patrick Buhr. 2020. "Class War in the Voting Booth: Bias Against High-Income Congressional Candidates." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 45 (1): 131–45.

Hamilton, Alexander, *et al.* 1788. "The Federalist Papers: No. 35." *January* 5, 1788.

Hansen, Eric R., and Christopher J. Clark. 2020. "Diversity in Party Leadership in State Legislatures." *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 20 (1): 81–107.

Harden, Jeffrey J. 2011. "A Bootstrap Method for Conducting Statistical Inference With Clustered Data." *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 11 (2): 223–46.

Harden, Jeffrey J., and Bruce A. Desmarais. 2011. "Linear Models With Outliers: Choosing Between Conditional-Mean and Conditional-Median Methods." *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 11 (4): 371–89.

Hitt, Matthew P., Craig Volden, and Alan E. Wiseman. 2017. "Spatial Models of Legislative Effectiveness." *American Journal of Political Science* 61 (3): 575–90.

Hout, Michael. 2008. "How class works: Objective and subjective aspects of class since the 1970s." In *Social Class: How Does it Work*, eds. Annette Lareau and Dalton Conley, 25–64. Russell Sage Foundation.

Hoyt, Crystal L., and Brenten H. DeShields. 2021. "How Social-Class Background Influences Perceptions of Political Leaders." *Political Psychology* 42 (2): 239–63.

Lawless, Jennifer L., Sean M. Theriault, and Samantha Guthrie. 2018. "Nice Girls? Sex, Collegiality, and Bipartisan Cooperation in the US Congress." *Journal of Politics* 80 (4): 1268–82.

Lollis, Jacob. 2024. "Replication Data for: Are Workers Effective Lawmakers?" https://doi.org/10.15139/S3/WFVTCW.

Makse, Todd. 2019. "Professional Backgrounds in State Legislatures, 1993-2012." *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 19 (3): 312–33.

Mansbridge, Jane. 1999. "Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent Yes." *Journal of Politics* 61 (3): 628–57.

Matthews, Donald R. 1954. "United States Senators and the Class Structure." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 18 (1): 5–22.

Matthews, Donald R. 1959. "The Folkways of the United States Senate: Conformity to Group Norms and Legislative Effectiveness." *American Political Science Review* 53 (4): 1064–89.

Miler, Kristina C. 2018. *Poor Representation: Congress and the Politics of Poverty in the United States*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nickelson, Jack, and Joshua M. Jansa. 2023. "Descriptive Representation and Innovation in American Legislatures." *Political Research Quarterly* 76 (4): 2018–2035.

Persson, Mikael, and Anders Sundell. 2023. "The Rich Have a Slight Edge: Evidence from Comparative Data on Income-Based Inequality in Policy Congruence." *British Journal of Political Science* 54 (2): 514–25.

Piston, Spencer. 2010. "How Explicit Racial Prejudice Hurt Obama in the 2008 Election." *Political Behavior* 32 (4): 431–51.

Rainey, Carlisle. 2014. "Arguing for a Negligible Effect." *American Journal of Political Science* 58 (4): 1083–91.

Stacy, Darrian. 2020. Wealth and Policymaking in the U.S. House of Representatives. APSA.

Treul, Sarah A. and Eric R. Hansen. 2023. "Primary Barriers to Working Class Representation." *Political Research Quarterly* 76 (3): 1516–28.

Volden, Craig, and Alan E. Wiseman. 2014. *Legislative Effectiveness in the United States Congress: The Lawmakers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Volden, Craig, and Alan E. Wiseman. 2018. "Legislative Effectiveness in the United States Senate." *Journal of Politics* 80 (2): 731–5.

Volden, Craig, Alan E. Wiseman. and Dana E. Wittmer. 2013. "When Are Women More Effective Lawmakers Than Men?" *American Journal of Political Science* 57 (2): 326–41.

Wagner, Angelia. 2019. "Avoiding the spotlight: public scrutiny, moral regulation, and LGBTQ candidate deterrence." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 9 (3): 1–17.

Weissert, Carol S. 1991. "Issue Salience and State Legislative Effectiveness." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 16 (4): 509–20.

**Author Biographies.**  Jacob M. Lollis is a Ph.D. Candidate at the University of Virginia.