



## **Highlights from the 90<sup>th</sup> Iowa General Assembly Legislative Effectiveness Scores**

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### **Executive Summary**

The Center for Effective Lawmaking (CEL) is pleased to announce the release of the State Legislative Effectiveness Scores (SLES) for the recently completed 90<sup>th</sup> Iowa General Assembly legislative session. This report offers highlights from our initial analyses of these scores, including:

- We identify the top-10 most effective legislators in the majority party in both chambers, the top-10 most effective minority-party lawmakers in the House of Representatives, and the top-5 most effective minority-party lawmakers in the Senate. Many lawmakers continued their patterns of highly effective lawmaking from the previous legislative session.
- We identify those lawmakers with the longest streaks of being in our prestigious “Above Expectations” category, as well as first-term lawmakers in this category.
- We find that, consistent with our published research findings, there is an overall lawmaking benefit from being in the majority party. Indeed, over the past three legislative terms, Democrats have been almost entirely shut out of the lawmaking process in Iowa. Over that time period, only 1 bill sponsored by minority-party Democrats became law, compared to 976 from majority-party Republicans.
- Across both chambers, serving as a committee chair is related to greater lawmaking effectiveness. In Iowa, six of the top ten most effective majority-party lawmakers in the Senate and three of the top ten most effective majority-party lawmakers in the House were committee chairs, underscoring the significant lawmaking influence of the role.
- In addition, our findings indicate that effective lawmakers in one legislative session are likely to remain effective across legislative sessions, as several legislators appear among the top-10 and top-5 most effective lawmakers list in both the 2023-2024 and 2021-2022 legislative sessions.

### **Introduction and Methodology**

The State Legislative Effectiveness Scores discussed here are based on the combination of fifteen metrics capturing the bills that each member of each state legislature sponsors, how far their bills

move through the lawmaking process, and how substantial their policy proposals are. The scores are normalized to an average value of 1.0 in both the House of Representatives and the State Senate in each legislative session. More on our [methodology](#) and [scores](#) can be found at our website.

For each member of the House of Representatives and State Senate, we also identify a Benchmark Score, based on the average lawmaking effectiveness of legislators who share that legislator’s majority- or minority-party status, level of seniority, and chair position on a committee. Controlling for these considerations is important in order to describe legislators on a more level playing field. For example, in the 2023-2024 Iowa House of Representatives, minority-party lawmakers had an average SLES of 0.13 compared to 1.49 for majority-party members, while committee chairs had an average SLES of 1.69. In the State Senate, those averages were 0.17 in the minority party, 1.39 in the majority party, and 1.48 among committee chairs.

We then label each lawmaker as “Above Expectations” for those outperforming their benchmark scores by 50% or more, “Below Expectations” for those below 50% of their benchmark, and “Meeting Expectations” for all other legislators.

Finally, within each party, we rank each member according to their SLES. This ranking is used to generate the lists of top performers highlighted in the tables below. Given the substantial lawmaking benefit that follows from being in the majority party, ranking the entire Iowa General Assembly would be inappropriate, but these comparisons within each party are quite informative.

**Highly Effective Republican Lawmakers in the 2023-2024 Iowa House of Representatives**

The following table identifies the ten highest-scoring Republicans in the 2023-2024 House of Representatives. Three of the top ten were committee chairs.

**Top Ten List—House Republicans (2023-2024 Legislative Session)**

	<u>Name</u>	<u>LES</u>	<u>Committee Chair</u>
1.	<b>Brian Lohse (District 45)</b>	6.05	None
2.	<b>Carter Nordman (District 47)</b>	4.02	None
3.	<b>Bill Gustoff (District 40)</b>	3.94	None
4.	<b>Bobby Kaufmann (District 82)</b>	3.49	Chair
5.	<b>Taylor Collins (District 95)</b>	3.21	None
6.	<b>Joel Fry (District 24)</b>	3.00	None
7.	<b>Charley Thomson (District 58)</b>	2.72	None
8.	<b>Megan Hess Jones (District 6)</b>	2.57	None
9.	<b>Phil Thompson (District 48)</b>	2.55	Chair
10.	<b>Shannon Lundgren (District 65)</b>	2.50	Chair

At the top of the list is Representative Brian Lohse from District 45 (Polk County) with a score of 6.05. In the 2023-2024 legislative session, he introduced 76 bills, 59 received action in committee, 54 received action beyond committee, 21 passed the House, and 14 became law.

Rep. Lohse has served in the Iowa House of Representatives since 2019. He previously served as a Bondurant City Councilman for eight years, and he also briefly served as the city’s Mayor Pro Tem. Rep. Lohse holds a B.S. in social sciences from the University of Northwestern St. Paul and a J.D. from Drake University School of Law. He was previously employed as an attorney for EMC Insurance. In 2012, Rep. Lohse and his wife, Mary, won the Iowa Powerball Lottery Jackpot. After winning, Rep. Lohse retired from law and opened a grocery store in Bondurant.

Five Republican Representatives on our current list were also among the top-10 highest scorers in the 2021-2022 legislative session: Rep. Brian Lohse (District 45), Rep. Carter Nordman (District 47), Rep. Bobby Kaufmann (District 82), Rep. Joel Fry (District 24), and Rep. Megan Hess Jones (District 6).

### Highly Effective Democratic Lawmakers in the 2023-2024 Iowa House of Representatives

The following table identifies the top-ten highest scorers in the 2023-2024 House of Representatives among minority-party Democrats.

#### Top Ten List—House Democrats (2023-2024 Legislative Session)

	<u>Name</u>	<u>LES</u>	<u>Seniority</u>
1.	<b>Charles Isenhart (District 72)</b>	0.84	8
2.	<b>Josh Turek (District 20)</b>	0.40	1
3.	<b>Art Staed (District 80)</b>	0.31	6
4.	<b>Dave Jacoby (District 86)</b>	0.29	11
5.	<b>Sean Bagniewski (District 35)</b>	0.24	1
6.	<b>Monica Kurth (District 98)</b>	0.23	4
7.	<b>Tracy Ehlert (District 79)</b>	0.20	3
8.	<b>Ken Croken (District 97)</b>	0.18	1
9.	<b>Sue Cahill (District 52)</b>	0.15	2
10.	<b>Megan Srinivas (District 30)</b>	0.14	1

Topping our list is Representative Charles Isenhart of District 72 (Dubuque County), with a State Legislative Effectiveness Score of 0.84. He introduced 48 bills in the 2023-2024 legislative session, 4 of which received action in committee, 2 of which received action beyond committee, and 1 passed the House of Representatives.

Rep. Isenhart served in the House of Representatives from 2008-2025. He holds a B.A. in political science from Loras College and an M.A. in journalism from Marquette University. Rep. Isenhart owned and managed Common Good Services, a firm specializing in organizational services and communications. He has been active in multiple statewide public service commissions, including

the 2010 Iowa Strategic Planning Council, the Iowans for a Better Future Board, and the Governor's 21st Century Workforce Council. Locally, he has been involved in the City of Dubuque Housing Commission, the City of Dubuque Community Development Commission, and the Dubuque Food Pantry Board.

Three Democratic Representatives on our current list were also among the top 10 highest scorers in the 2021-2022 legislative session: Rep. Charles Isenhart (District 72), Rep. Art Staed (District 80), and Rep. Dave Jacoby (District 86).

### **Highly Effective Republican Lawmakers in the 2023-2024 Iowa State Senate**

The following table identifies the ten highest-scoring Republicans in the 2023-2024 State Senate. Six of the top ten were committee chairs.

#### **Top Ten List—Senate Republicans (2023-2024 Legislative Session)**

	<b><u>Name</u></b>	<b><u>LES</u></b>	<b><u>Committee Chair</u></b>
<b>1.</b>	<b>Dan Dawson (District 10)</b>	3.68	Chair
<b>2.</b>	<b>Mike Boussetot (District 21)</b>	3.52	None
<b>3.</b>	<b>Chris Cournoyer (District 35)</b>	2.88	Chair
<b>4.</b>	<b>Scott Webster (District 47)</b>	2.41	None
<b>5.</b>	<b>Tim Kraayenbrink (District 4)</b>	2.01	Chair
<b>6.</b>	<b>Tom Shipley (District 9)</b>	1.97	Chair
<b>7.</b>	<b>Dave Rowley (District 5)</b>	1.94	None
<b>8.</b>	<b>Adrian Dickey (District 44)</b>	1.94	Chair
<b>9.</b>	<b>Jeff Edler (District 26)</b>	1.91	Chair
<b>10.</b>	<b>Jeff Taylor (District 2)</b>	1.91	None

Among Republicans in the Senate, Senator Dan Dawson from District 10 (Pottawattamie County) ranked first with a SLES score of 3.68. In the 2023-2024 session, he introduced 50 bills, 50 of which received action in committee, 45 received action beyond committee, 17 passed the Senate, and 12 became law.

Sen. Dawson is a retired Chief Warrant Officer 3 with the United States Army, and a member of the Iowa National Guard. He has a combined 24 years of service in the United States Armed Forces. He holds a B.S. in criminal justice administration from Bellevue University. Currently he is employed as a special agent with the Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation. In the community, he is heavily involved in the American Legion, VFW, and Knights of Columbus.

Three legislators on the list were among the top 10 highest scoring Republicans in the 2021-2022 legislative session: Sen. Dan Dawson (District 10), Sen. Chris Cournoyer (District 35), and Sen. Tom Shipley (District 9).

## Highly Effective Democratic Lawmakers in the 2023-2024 Iowa State Senate

### Top Five List—Senate Democrats (2023-2024 Legislative Session)

The following table identifies the top-five highest scorers in the 2023-2024 State Senate among minority-party Democrats.

	<u>Name</u>	<u>LES</u>	<u>Seniority</u>
1.	<b>Janet Petersen (District 18)</b>	0.51	6
2.	<b>Molly Donahue (District 37)</b>	0.49	1
3.	<b>Janice Weiner (District 45)</b>	0.42	1
4.	<b>Nate Boulton (District 20)</b>	0.26	4
5.	<b>Sarah Trone Garriott (District 14)</b>	0.23	2

Senator Janet Petersen from District 18 (Polk County) had the highest SLES for Senate Democrats in the 2023-2024 legislative session, with a score of 0.51. During the 2023-2024 legislative session, she introduced 27 bills, all of which received action in committee.

Sen. Petersen has served in the Senate since 2013. From 2001-2013, she represented District 64 in the Iowa House of Representatives. She holds a B.A. in public relations from the University of Northern Iowa and an M.A. in integrated communications from Drake University. Sen. Peterson served as Senate Minority Leader from 2017-2021 and was the first woman to lead the Senate Democratic Caucus. She is the founder and board member of Healthy Birth Day Inc, a nonprofit focused on advocating for stillbirth awareness, prevention, and legislation in Iowa.

Sen. Peterson also appeared on the top-5 most effective Democratic lawmakers in the Senate list for the 2021-2022 legislative session.

### Lawmakers with Long-Standing Patterns of “Above Expectations”

Those who significantly exceed their benchmark score (which is calculated based on their seniority and status as a majority party member and/or committee chairperson) are identified as being in our “Above Expectations” category. The lists below identify the Representatives with the longest active streaks of exceeding expectations in consecutive sessions continuing through (and including) the 2023-2024 legislative session.

### State Representatives with Longest Streaks of “Above Expectations” (through the 2023-2024 Legislative Session)

	<u>Name</u>	<u>Streak</u>	<u>SLES (2023-2024)</u>	<u>Seniority</u>
1.	<b>Charles Isenhart (D-72)</b>	7 Legislative Sessions	0.84	8 Legislative Sessions

2.	<b>Art Staed (D-80)</b>	5 Legislative Sessions	0.31	6 Legislative Sessions
3.	<b>Joel Fry (R-24)</b>	3 Legislative Sessions	3.00	7 Legislative Sessions
4.	<b>Dave Jacoby (D-86)</b>	3 Legislative Sessions	0.29	11 Legislative Sessions

Representative Charles Isenhart (D) of District 72 (Dubuque County) had the longest streak of "Above Expectations," with 8 legislative sessions, and a SLES score of 0.84 in the 2023-2024 legislative session. Rep. Isenhart has consistently ranked in the top 10 of House Democrats since the 2011-2012 legislative session.

### **State Senators with Longest Streaks of “Above Expectations” (through the 2023-2024 Legislative Session)**

	<u>Name</u>	<u>Streak</u>	<u>SLES (2023-2024)</u>	<u>Seniority</u>
1.	<b>Janet Petersen (D-18)</b>	6 Legislative Sessions	0.51	6 Legislative Sessions
2.	<b>Dan Dawson (R-10)</b>	4 Legislative Sessions	3.68	4 Legislative Sessions

Senator Janet Petersen (D) of District 18 (Polk County) had the longest streak of "Above Expectations," with 6 legislative sessions, and a SLES score of 0.51 in the 2023-2024 legislative session. Sen. Petersen has consistently ranked in the top 5 of Senate Democratic lawmakers since the 2013-2014 legislative session.

### **High-Performing Freshmen**

One way to identify future legislative leaders is to identify freshmen Representatives and Senators who earned an “Above Expectations” rating in their first term. For freshman legislators, their initial scores are compared to benchmarks for newcomers—so when a freshman outperforms their cohort, it can reveal strong political acumen, the ability to navigate legislative procedures quickly, and skill in coalition-building or policy entrepreneurship. These traits often correlate with future leadership roles. Our research on the U.S. Congress suggests that legislators who perform well early on are more likely to be selected for committee chairs or leadership positions, and to influence major legislation in subsequent terms. Hence, identifying high-performing freshmen can offer early signals of who might rise through the ranks.

### **Freshmen Representatives “Above Expectations” (2023-2024 Legislative Session)**

	<u>Name</u>	<u>SLES (2023-2024)</u>
1.	<b>Bill Gustoff (R-40)</b>	3.94

2.	<b>Taylor Collins (R-95)</b>	3.21
3.	<b>Charley Thomas (R-58)</b>	2.72
4.	<b>Josh Turek (D-20)</b>	0.40
5.	<b>Sean Bagniewski (D-35)</b>	0.24
6.	<b>Ken Croken (D-97)</b>	0.18

The State Representative with the highest "Above Expectations" score during his freshman term was Republican Representative Bill Gustoff (Polk County) with a score of 3.94. He also emerged as one of the top 10 most effective Republican representatives during the 2023-2024 legislative session.

During the 2023-2024 legislative session, Rep. Gustoff introduced 59 bills, 36 of which received action in committee, 31 received action beyond committee, 13 passed the House, and 8 became law. Rep. Gustoff holds a B.A. in political science from the University of Iowa and a J.D. with distinction from the University of Iowa College of Law. He is currently employed as the executive director of a Nashville-based national charitable estate and gift planning firm. In addition, he is a founding member of Hagenow, Gustoff, Karas, and Ridgeway LLP. Rep. Gustoff is involved in many organizations across the state and is the former treasurer for the Republican Party of Iowa State Central Committee, and the former President of Habitat for Humanity Iowa.

### **Freshmen Senators “Above Expectations” (2023-2024 Legislative Session)**

	<b><u>Name</u></b>	<b><u>SLES (2023-2024)</u></b>
1.	<b>Mike Bousselot (R-21)</b>	3.52
2.	<b>Scott Webster (R-47)</b>	2.41
3.	<b>Molly Donahue (D-37)</b>	0.49
4.	<b>Janice Weiner (D-45)</b>	0.42

Senator Mike Bousselot (R) of District 21 (Polk County) was the freshman Senator with the highest "Above Expectations" SLES score for the 2023-2024 legislative session. Additionally, Sen. Bousselot was named the second most effective legislator in the Iowa General Assembly for the 2023-2024 legislative session.

Sen. Bousselot is a former member of the Iowa House of Representatives. He attended the University of Iowa for his undergraduate and master's degrees in accounting. After, he pursued a J.D. from Drake University. Sen. Bousselot began his career as a consultant for Deloitte. From 2015-2017, he served as Chief of Staff for Governor Terry Branstad and Lieutenant Governor Kim Reynolds, focusing mostly on pension, tax, health care, and local government policy. After the role, Sen. Bousselot became the managing director for Summit Agricultural Group and served as the Vice President for Innovative Captive Strategies. In 2021, Governor Kim Reynolds appointed him to serve as Director of the Iowa Department of Management. Shortly after, he was elected to the Iowa House of Representatives during a special election.

## **Other Findings**

In terms of broader patterns, it is difficult to overstate the degree to which minority-party lawmakers are shut out of the lawmaking process in Iowa. While the SLES of minority-party lawmakers across the country on the whole averages about 0.6, the scores for minority-party members in Iowa have been around a quarter of that, averaging around 0.15. And their successes are mostly limited to early lawmaking stages. For example, none of the 150 bills introduced by Democratic Senators in 2023-2024 was considered beyond the committee stage.

Indeed, combining the last three legislative terms together – across both the House of Representatives and the Senate – only one of the 977 total laws was sponsored by a Democrat. This ratio is significantly out of proportion to the number of seats the parties hold in the chambers, and well beyond what is seen in most legislatures across the country.

## **Conclusion**

The 90<sup>th</sup> Iowa General Assembly legislative session demonstrated consistent patterns in legislative effectiveness, with experienced legislators, committee chairs, and majority-party members continuing to hold a distinct advantage in advancing their policy agendas. Across both chambers, many of the most effective lawmakers continued their high performance from previous sessions, indicating a durable capacity for lawmaking among key figures. These findings underscore the importance of institutional positions and experiences in shaping legislative outcomes in Iowa.