



Highlights from the 2023-2024 South Dakota Legislature State 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 2023-2024 South Dakota Legislature 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 3 most effective minority-party lawmakers in the House of Representatives, and the most effective minority-party lawmaker in the Senate. Many legislators 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 the South Dakota Legislature has been notably successful in integrating freshmen lawmakers into the legislative process. In South Dakota, freshmen lawmakers' SLES scores across both chambers are notably higher than the national average, with freshmen Representatives and Senators enjoying similar levels of success in bill outcomes as their more senior colleagues.
- We find that, consistent with our published research findings, there is an overall lawmaking benefit from being in the majority party. This is not a new phenomenon in South Dakota. Across the 2023–2024 legislative term, majority-party Republicans consistently outperformed minority-party Democrats in State Legislative Effectiveness Scores (SLES) and bill outcomes. These differences highlight the institutional advantages of majority-party association.
- Serving as a committee chair is related to greater lawmaking effectiveness. This phenomenon during the 2023-2024 South Dakota Legislature legislative session, particularly in the Senate, where many of the most effective lawmakers across the majority party held committee chair positions.

- In addition, our findings indicate that effective lawmakers in one legislative session are likely to remain effective lawmakers across sessions, as several legislators appear among the lists of most effective lawmakers 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. While the scores capture how successful an individual member of the South Dakota House or Senate is at advancing her sponsored bills, compared to all of members of her chamber (in a legislative term), it's important to be cognizant of the fact that the State Legislative Effectiveness Scores do not capture lawmaking activities that occur behind the scenes, such as legislators advocating for the passage of bills that they haven't sponsored. The scores also don't capture how effective individual members of the House or Senate are at blocking the advancement of other legislators' sponsored bills. To the extent that we are interested in identifying who is most successful at advancing their sponsored legislation through the different stages of the lawmaking process (and why), however, the State Legislative Effectiveness Scores provide us with an objective indicator of legislators' efforts. 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 South Dakota House of Representatives, minority-party lawmakers had an average SLES of 0.64 compared to 1.04 for majority-party members, while committee chairs had an average SLES of 1.72. In the State Senate, those averages were 0.64 in the minority party, 1.05 in the majority party, and 1.40 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 South Dakota Legislature together would be inappropriate, but these comparisons within each party are quite informative.

Highly Effective Republican Lawmakers in the 2023-2024 South Dakota House of Representatives

The following table identifies the ten highest-scoring Republicans in the 2023-2024 House of Representatives. Four 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.	Will Mortenson (District 24)	3.62	Chair
2.	Chris Karr (District 11)	3.01	None
3.	Taylor Rehfeldt (District 14)	2.71	None
4.	Mike Weisgram (District 24)	2.57	Chair
5.	Tyler Tordsen (District 14)	2.30	None
6.	Kevin Jensen (District 16)	2.23	Chair
7.	Greg Jamison (District 12)	2.18	None
8.	Fred Deutsch (District 4)	2.07	None
9.	Tim Reisch (District 8)	2.03	Chair
10.	Tony Venhuizen (District 13)	1.99	None

At the top of the list is Representative Will Mortenson from District 24 (Hughes, Hyde, Stanley, and Sully counties) with a score of 3.62. In the 2023-2024 legislative session, he introduced 12 bills, all of which received action in committee, action beyond committee, and passed the House, and 6 of which became law.

Rep. Mortenson assumed office in 2021 and served as the Majority Leader of the South Dakota House from 2023-2024. Rep. Mortenson holds a B.A. from the University of South Dakota and a J.D. from the University of Virginia School of Law. During his early career, he worked in the office of Governor Dennis Daugaard. Currently, he practices estate planning, business, and agricultural law at a small firm in Fort Pierre while working part-time as a cowhand on his family's cow-calf operation. Rep. Mortenson is also an enrolled member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe.

Two Republican Representatives on our current list were also among the top-10 highest scorers in the 2021-2022 legislative session: Rep. Chris Karr (District 11) and Rep. Fred Deutsch (District 84).

Highly Effective Democratic Lawmakers in the 2023-2024 South Dakota House of Representatives

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

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

	<u>Name</u>	<u>LES</u>	<u>Seniority</u>
1.	Kadyn Wittman (District 15)	1.63	1
2.	Linda Duba (District 15)	1.03	3
3.	Erin Healy (District 10)	0.47	3

Topping our list is Representative Kadyn Wittman of District 15 (Minnehaha County) with a State Legislative Effectiveness Score of 1.63. She introduced 9 bills in the 2023-2024 legislative session: 8 received action in committee, 3 received action beyond committee, and 2 passed the House and became law.

Rep. Wittman assumed office in 2023. She holds a dual bachelor's degree in arts and sociology from Augustana University. Before joining the House, Rep Wittman served as an appointed member of the Sioux City Homeless Task Force. Rep. Wittman is currently employed as the Director of Development at the Sioux Falls Family YMCA. In the community, she is a board member of Bridging the Gap, a non-profit organization that uplifts unrepresented voices and communities. In 2023, she was accepted into a Bush Foundation Change Network cohort, which is a year-long study program designed to develop leadership and communication skills.

Rep. Erin Healy (District 10) was the only Democratic Representative to rank among the top-3 most effective Democratic lawmakers in the House in the 2023-2024 and 2021-2022 legislative sessions.

Highly Effective Republican Lawmakers in the 2023-2024 South Dakota State Senate

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

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

	<u>Name</u>	<u>LES</u>	<u>Committee Chair</u>
1.	David Wheeler (District 22)	2.93	Chair
2.	Michael Rohl (District 1)	2.62	None
3.	Tim Reed (District 7)	2.35	Chair
4.	Lee Schoenbeck (District 5)	2.20	Chair

5.	Casey Crabtree (District 8)	1.98	Chair
6.	Erin Tobin (District 21)	1.95	Chair
7.	Jean Hunhoff (District 18)	1.72	Chair
8.	Helene Duhamel (District 32)	1.54	Chair
9.	Sydney Davis (District 17)	1.53	None
10.	Ryan Maher (District 28)	1.47	None

Among Republicans in the Senate, Senator David Wheeler of District 22 (Beadle and Kingsbury counties) ranked first with a SLES of 2.93. In the 2023-2024 session, he introduced 18 bills; all of which received action in committee; and 16 of which received action beyond committee, passed the Senate, and became law.

Sen. Wheeler assumed office in 2021. Before joining the Senate, Sen. Wheeler served on the Huron School Board for 7 years and was appointed to the South Dakota Lottery Commission by Governor Dennis Daugaard. He holds a B.A., M.P.A., and J.D. from the University of South Dakota. Following law school, Sen. Wheeler entered private practice as a partner at Blue, Wheeler, and Banks LLP. In 2025, Sen. Wheeler resigned from the Senate and was appointed by Governor Rhoden to the Third Judicial Circuit Court as a circuit judge.

Five legislators on the list were among the top-10 highest-scoring Republicans in the 2021-2022 legislative session: Sen. David Wheeler (District 22), Michael Rohl (District 1), Sen. Lee Schoenbeck (District 5), Sen. Helene Duhamel (District 32), and Sen. Ryan Maher (District 28).

Most Effective Democratic Lawmaker in Senate (2023-2024 Legislative Session)

	<u>Name</u>	<u>LES</u>	<u>Seniority</u>
1.	Shawn L. Bordeaux (District 26)	1.18	1

Senator Shawn Bordeaux (Mellette and Todd Counties) had the highest SLES for Senate Democrats in the 2023-2024 legislative session with a score of 1.18. During the 2023-2024 legislative session, he introduced 28 bills, all of which received action in committee, 2 of which received action beyond committee, and 1 of which passed the Senate.

Sen. Bordeaux assumed office in the Senate in 2023. Before joining the Senate, he served in the South Dakota House, representing District 26A. From 2023-2025, he served as the Assistant Minority Leader of the Senate. Sen. Bordeaux holds a B.S. in business administration and a master's degree in community and regional planning from the University of Nebraska – Lincoln. Since 2005, he has served as the Director of the Institute of Tribal Lands at Sinte Gleska University. In addition, he served as a Gaming Commissioner for the Rosebud Sioux Tribe and Chairman of the Board at Cherry-Todd Electric Cooperative Inc.

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. We identify the Representative and Senator with the longest active streak of exceeding expectations in consecutive sessions continuing through (and including) the 2023-2024 legislative session below.

State Representative with Longest Streak of “Above Expectations” (through the 2023-2024 Legislative Session)

	<u>Name</u>	<u>Streak</u>	<u>SLES (2023-2024)</u>	<u>Seniority</u>
1.	Fred Deutsch (R-4)	3 Legislative Sessions	2.07	3 Legislative Sessions

Representative Fred Deutsch (R) of District 4 (Brookings, Codington, Deuel, and Grant Counties) had the longest streak of "Above Expectations" with 3 legislative sessions and a score of 2.07 in the 2023-2024 legislative session. During the session, Rep. Deutsch introduced 12 bills, of which 10 received action in committee, 7 received action beyond committee and passed the House, and 5 became law.

Rep. Deutsch assumed office in 2015. Before joining the House, Rep. Deutsch served on the Watertown Board of Education. He studied pre-med during his undergraduate degree and attended chiropractic school in St. Paul. Later, he opened Deutsch Chiropractic with his wife and eventually built three additional health care practices. In the community, he has been involved with the Watertown Boys and Girls Club, the Haven Center, and the Meals on Wheels Program.

State Senator with Longest Streak of “Above Expectations” (through the 2023-2024 Legislative Session)

	<u>Name</u>	<u>Streak</u>	<u>SLES (2023-2024)</u>	<u>Seniority</u>
1.	Lee Schoenbeck (R-5)	3 Legislative Sessions	2.20	3 Legislative Sessions

Senator Lee Schoenbeck (R) of District 5 (Codington County) had the longest streak of "Above Expectations" with 3 legislative sessions and an SLES of 2.20 in the 2023-2024 legislative session. During the 2023-2024 legislative session, Sen. Schoenbeck introduced 18 bills, all of which received action in committee, 16 of which received action beyond committee and passed the Senate, and 12 of which became law.

Sen. Schoenbeck first served in the Senate from 1995-1997 and served again from 2003-2007. From 2015-2017, Sen. Schoenbeck represented the 5th District in the South Dakota House. In 2019, he was reelected to the Senate and, from 2021-2025, served as President Pro Tempore of the South Dakota Senate. Before joining the State Legislature, Sen. Schoenbeck served as the State’s Attorney for Day County from 1985-1989. He received an undergraduate degree from Augustana College and a J.D. from the University of South Dakota School of Law. He currently works as an attorney for Schoenbeck & Erickson PC, practicing personal injury, insurance, commercial, and estate planning litigation. In the community, he serves as Chairman of the Catholic Community Foundation.

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. Freshmen legislators’ 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.	Tyler Tordsen (R-14)	2.30
2.	Tony Venhuizen (R-13)	1.99
3.	Brian Mulder (R-11)	1.83
4.	Ben Krohmer (R-11)	1.79
5.	James Wangsness (R-23)	1.77
6.	Kadyn Wittman (D-15)	1.63

Tyler Tordsen (Minnehaha County) was the Representative with the highest SLES among freshmen ranked “Above Expectations,” in the House with a score of 2.30. During the 2023-2024 legislative session, Rep. Tordsen introduced 9 bills: all received action in committee, 7 received action beyond committee, and 6 passed the House and became law.

Before joining the House, Rep. Tordsen served on the SD Board of Educational Telecommunications. Rep. Tordsen holds a bachelor’s degree in political science and economics from the University of South Dakota and a Master of Military Operational Art and Science degree from Air University. During his early career, he spent 8 years working in the office of U.S. Senator Mike Rounds, serving as the Southeast Regional Director and State Director of Tribal Affairs. After working for Senator Rounds, Rep. Tordsen pursued a role at the Sioux Metro Growth Alliance, and he is now the President and CEO of that organization. Rep. Tordsen is an enrolled member of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Sioux Tribe. In the community, he is involved in the Downtown Sioux Falls Rotary Club and the USD Alumni Association Board of Directors.

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

	<u>Name</u>	<u>SLES (2023-2024)</u>
1.	Tim Reed (R-7)	2.35
2.	Sydney Davis (R-17)	1.53
3.	Shawn L. Bordeaux (D-26)	1.18

Senator Tim Reed (Brookings County) had the highest SLES of those ranking “Above Expectations” during their freshman term in the Senate, with a score of 2.35. During the 2023-2024 legislative session, Sen. Reed introduced 19 bills; 18 received action in committee; 13 received action beyond committee; 12 passed the Senate; and 10 became law.

Before joining the Senate, Sen. Reed represented South Dakota’s 7th District in the State House from 2017 – 2022. In addition, he served in the Brookings City Government for 13 years and was Mayor of Brookings for 8 years. Sen. Reed holds a B.S. in commercial economics from South Dakota State University. During his early career, he worked as the Development Director for the South Dakota State University College of Engineering, and today he is the CEO of the Brookings Economic Corporation. He has been recognized for his leadership through various accolades, including SDSU’s Presidential Special Citation and Medallion and the 2020 Disabled American Veterans Outstanding State Representative Award.

Other Findings

In terms of broader patterns, the South Dakota Legislature has been notably successful in helping to integrate freshmen members into the lawmaking process. Across the country as a whole, the SLES for freshmen lawmakers has averaged about 0.65. In contrast, across recent terms in South Dakota, freshmen House members have averaged around 0.80 and freshmen Senators have averaged above 0.95. This means that they are nearly as accomplished at lawmaking in their first term as are their more senior colleagues.

Such similarities seem to translate well to all stages of the lawmaking process. Over the last two legislative terms, for example, freshmen Representatives have on average produced two laws each while freshmen Senators have produced about four laws each. Remarkably, these averages are nearly identical to those of their more senior colleagues. Given a legislative goal of bringing in the ideas and expertise of all legislators regardless of background or seniority in the quest for policy solutions, this set of findings suggests an egalitarian lawmaking process in South Dakota that may serve the state very well.

Conclusion

The 2023-2024 South Dakota Legislature legislative session demonstrated consistent patterns in legislative effectiveness, 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 South Dakota.