

# Just Passing Through? Explaining the Career Lengths of State Legislators

Zach Baumann, Ph.D.  
Lecturer, Department of Political Science  
Pennsylvania State University  
zdb1@psu.edu

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## Abstract

This paper explores the attitudes of state legislators toward holding office and working in the legislature. Creating and distributing an original survey to current and former officeholders, I evaluate how they view the job of legislating, evaluate their chambers, assess their levels of success, and decide to run again or retire. These responses reveal members who are motivated by the ability to influence public policy and give back to their communities. Variation is found in responses to the goals of public service, how the chamber is evaluated, and members' ability to advance their agenda based on the seniority of the respondent and their status as a former or current legislator. Modeling the length of time house members serve in office reveals higher levels of satisfaction with the chamber, the resources provided, and the ability to make a difference in terms of public policy positively associated with longer stays in office. These results show state legislators are not monolithic, but motivated by different goals illustrated in their patterns of officeholding.

Legislators decide to run and serve in state government for a variety of reasons including feelings of civic duty and self-fulfillment, the desire to advance and support a political party, and the possibility of creating better public policy. These considerations, and many more, are not new to popular or scholarly literature; political scientists and journalists have been writing about political ambition for decades.<sup>1</sup> Largely ignored in this discussion, however, are the motivating forces that drive legislators to remain in office. How do officeholders view their jobs and what implications may this have for representation?

Results from public polls reveal that the American public does not hold the job performance of officeholders in high regard. In a 2008 survey of state legislatures, only four states can claim approval ratings above fifty percent while three states have earned scores below twenty (Richardson, Jr., Konisky & Milyo 2012). Most state legislatures have job approval ratings below fifty percent with more citizens in their states not approving of their handling of the state's government than approving. Conventional wisdom holds that the public believes officeholders are generally working for their own benefit or the well-being of their campaign contributors. While many in society view government as corrupt, self-serving, and inert how do legislators themselves view their jobs? What caused

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<sup>1</sup>While certainly not an exhaustive list, see Barber (1965), Schlesinger (1966), Black (1972), Squire (1988), Berkman & Eisenstein (1999), Battista (2003), Gaddie (2004), Stone, Maisel & Maestas (2004), Maestas, Maisel & Stone (2005), Fox & Lawless (2005), and Fox & Lawless (2011) for a more thorough discussion of legislative ambition.

them to run for office in the first place, stay for as long as they did, and ultimately leave the chamber?

This paper seeks to understand the characteristics of state legislators and how these negative attitudes correspond with their own perceptions of their character and service. I construct and administer an original survey of officeholders in four states to assess a number of characteristics including their level of civic duty, government efficacy, attitudes toward the goal of public service, evaluations of the chamber, its rules, norms, and resources, as well as their ability to pass legislation and accomplish their agenda. These data are used to understand how officeholders evaluate themselves, the chambers to which they belong, and those factors that contribute to their tenure decisions. While public sentiment toward legislators and their chambers may be low, it is important to understand how they view themselves and those factors that motivate the decisions to remain in office for a couple versus many terms.

## **What Motivates State Legislative Careers?**

To understand legislative careers it is helpful to start by exploring those factors that motivate people to run for the state house. The literature regarding candidate entry falls within three general themes: those models utilizing sociological explanatory variables, those relying on psychological explanations, and those viewing entry through a rational choice framework (Gaddie 2004). Sociological approaches to candidate entry rely on the group characteristics from which candidates are drawn (Matthews 1954, Matthews 1960), whereas, the development of a candidate's personal character, their life experiences, and personal need highlight psychological approaches to the study of candidate entry (Barber 1965). Most frequently used, however, rational choice scholars emphasize the costs of running a campaign and the benefits gained by successful candidates once elected (Jacobson & Kernell 1983).

Many hypotheses are offered explaining why politicians run for office. Potential

politicians are influenced by their parents and background (Fox & Lawless 2005), the availability of an open seat (Stone, Maisel & Maestas 2004), the partisan orientation of the electorate they hope to represent (Bianco 1984), and their ability to secure sufficient resources (Berkman 1994). While these are only four hypotheses offered in explanation of candidates' election-seeking behaviors, more generally stated, potential politicians value holding electoral office and weigh the costs of running, and potentially losing, against the benefits gained in winning (Jacobson & Kernell 1983). The assumption that candidates are strategic, only entering elections when their perceived benefits outweigh their perceived costs, pervades the literature on candidate entry and progressive ambition (Bianco 1984, Palfrey 1984, Banks & Kiewiet 1989, Osborne & Slivinski 1996, Stone, Maisel & Maestas 2004).

In attempting to understand why candidates enter races, the literature makes a distinction between the underlying ambition to hold elected office and the decision to run for a specific seat. Maestas, Fulton, Maisel & Stone (2006) most clearly make the distinction between ambition and the decision to run for the U.S. House using survey responses of existing state legislators. This survey instrument distinguishes between latent ambition for office holding and the decision to run in a particular election. Before a seat becomes available, and before the decision to run is made, a class of people exists with the ambition to hold public office. This ambition may be due to their family socialization, their general sense of political efficacy, or their status as a historically marginalized group (Fox & Lawless 2005).

People growing up in a homes stressing the importance of civic involvement and political participation are made to value the importance of government. Further, these individuals observe how their civically involved parents are able to work within the system and accomplish a desired goal. Marginalized groups, however, have been pushed away from political decision-making; identifying as a member of a historically disenfranchised group decreases the likelihood of being politically ambitious (Fox & Lawless 2005). The findings argue that every individual either holds or lacks political ambition. These initial

feelings, if they exist, are translated into expressed ambition, and made known through the individuals' candidacy for office (Fox & Lawless 2005, Maestas et al. 2006).

Once in office legislators' careers are motivated by a number of factors including their goals, ability to enact their agendas, and their desire to move into higher offices. Barber (1965) identifies four types of state legislators: spectators, or those who are entertained by the legislative process and the social scene associated with the legislature (Pp. 214). Advertisers, or legislators who are seeking personal benefits from officeholding, in many cases building an extensive portfolio of business contacts and improving their name recognition. These legislators may be less willing to seek office after their objectives are achieved (Pp. 215). Reluctants are legislators who are often recruited by their party to run for office, are generally well-respected in their communities, but had office thrust upon them (Pp. 215). Finally, lawmakers, or a legislator who is actively engaged in the legislative process and wishes to continue holding office. These are legislators who enjoy policy, building-up particularized knowledge, and working for many years to achieve policy objectives (Barber 1965, 216).

Schlesinger's (1966) theory also contends that officeholders' goals for running and serving in the legislature may differ. Examining the careers of state legislators, Schlesinger's (1966) theory contends that state legislators are motivated by progressive, static, or discrete ambition. Progressively ambitious legislators are characterized by their desire to ascend up the career ladder, moving from the state legislature to Congress or from the state senate to governor, for example. Unlike those who seek higher office, statically ambitious politicians have no desire to move up the career ladder and have the goal of being elected to their current position. Legislators with static ambition are comfortable and gain satisfaction from their position and do not desire to seek higher office. Finally, legislators who seek only to be elected for a short period to accomplish, most commonly a policy outcome, are defined as discretely ambitious.

Progressive ambition is impacted by the structure of the electoral system and the investments legislators make in political activities. Progressively ambitious legislators will

attempt to learn both political and policy skills that better equip them to serve the needs of their constituencies. This investment in learning does not occur out of the legislators' feelings of duty, but because they hope to continue holding the seat and possibly use this knowledge to gain a better elected office. Progressively ambitious office-holders will invest time in learning the policy positions of their constituencies and making decisions consistent with these preferences (Masestas 2000, Masestas 2003). Political ambition is a function of the investments an officeholder makes in political activities (Black 1972). It is important to note, however, that the level of ambition demonstrated by lawmakers may change over time with the shifting political environment – being diminished as officeholders become more cynical about politics or alter their beliefs about their qualifications to run with larger trends in politics (Fox & Lawless 2011).

Legislators are attracted to legislative service for a variety of reasons, and once elected, have individual goals for their time in office and their futures. Career anchor theory postulates that over time, people come to know what they like and dislike about their job, placing value on those items they evaluate as worthwhile. After determining this *sense of self*, individuals become anchored to those aspects of their career they evaluate positively and are less likely to move away from them (Bernick 2001). This theory implies that once legislators find an aspect of their job desirable they are less likely to alter their careers, favoring those tasks and attributes that have made them happy in the past versus the uncertain outcome that can occur from changing course. Bernick (2001) finds three career anchors in state legislative membership: power, service, and specialization. Power represents a legislator's desire to be placed on powerful committees, become leaders of the party and body, and gain positions allowing them to maximize their influence over the legislative process. The service anchor represents a legislator's desire to use their skills and talents for the benefit of the legislative body. Finally, the specialization anchor represents those who want to become highly knowledgeable and competent in a particular area within the legislature. Lawmakers may alter their approach to officeholding as their interests change or their power within the chamber increases or decreases.

Finally, the literature regarding legislative careers focuses on the decision of officeholders to leave their positions. Legislators leave office in one of two ways: voluntarily or involuntarily. In the case of the latter, it is not expected that officeholders have altered their reasons for serving, but their constituents have withdrawn their support for their candidacy. The former reason for legislators to exit office can be attributed to a number of variables. First, age is a powerful determining factor of a legislators' decision to retire. The officeholder could become old enough that they have determined it is time to step away from the job. The progressive ambition literature postulates that members will run for higher office only when the likelihood of success is reasonably high. As members age, and the opportunity to advance has not yet arisen, they become less likely to express willingness to seek higher office (Blair & Henry 1981, Francis & Baker 1989, Bernstein & Wolak 2002, Gaddie 2004). The age-ambition relationship is not linear, but ambition plateaus during the member's middle-age as legislators realize their personal ambition may no longer match their ability to become elected to higher office (Hain 1974).

Aside from age, legislators decide to retire due to professional, political, and personal reasons (Blair & Henry 1981). It is expected that officeholders will remain in their positions as long as the benefit they derive from service exceeds the opportunity costs they absorb from serving in the legislature (Blair & Henry 1981). Members of many state legislatures are asked to give-up lucrative private careers to pursue government service in legislatures where they are not well rewarded. The professionalization of the legislature will determine the type of people attracted to officeholding (Squire 1988), and subsequently the incentives they have for remaining or leaving office. Political reasons for retirement include the likelihood of facing a serious challenger in the next election, members' frustration with the legislative body, or the inability to advance their agendas (Blair & Henry 1981). Finally, personal reasons including family, health, age, children, and other life-altering events contribute to members' decisions to retire (Blair & Henry 1981, Francis & Baker 1989, Gaddie 2004). Surveying state legislators about their reasons for leaving office reveals that four primary variables explain their decision

to vacate office: opportunity costs, legislative dissatisfaction, career ambitions, and their health and age (Francis & Baker 1989).

Finally, while retirement is rarely studied at the state level, results derived from the United States Senate largely indicate similar variables driving the decision to retire. The age of the legislator and their status as a majority party member significantly explain the decision of senators to retire (Bernstein & Wolak 2002). Senators are likely to retire as they climb up the age ladder and less likely to retire when in the majority party. Further, their membership in prominent committees, subcommittees, or position within the Senate leadership structure did not significantly impact a members' decision to retire (Bernstein & Wolak 2002).

## **A Theory of State Legislative Officeholding**

Legislators are motivated to run for office based on their ambition to serve and the current political climate. This ambition to run for office can be motivated by a number of factors including their family's involvement in politics, their desire to give back to their communities, their education, and other benefits from holding office that they find rewarding. The desire to run in any one particular election is determined, in part, by their probability of winning. Candidates will be rational in determining when to expend the time, money, and resources necessary to launch a successful campaign.

Once in office legislators will look to fill roles they find rewarding. These responsibilities could include, among others, working on several policy areas or narrowly focusing on just one, building influence in the chamber and state government, accumulating skills that will be advantageous when running for higher office, networking and building business and social contacts, or working for the benefit of their local communities. Just as progressive ambition is dynamic, it is also expected that legislators may enter office for one reason and over the course of their tenure discover they enjoy other aspects of service more. These lawmakers, like any other employee, will be rational in determining when to stay in office



and when it is time to depart. They are expected to stay when the cost of holding office is low, they lack the desire or ability to hold higher, more desirable positions, and they are able to advance those agenda items they find valuable. The benefit officeholders derive from service, therefore, is in part determined by the institutional design of the chamber and the resources they are provided. When members find value in their work and are able to make a difference they are likely to stay.

Legislators leave office when the costs of running or holding the position outweigh the benefits they receive. These costs could include the opportunity cost associated with lost income, being away from their families, and completing other actions they find more valuable. The probability of facing a difficult primary or general election race, a changing district, or difficult political climate may also contribute to a members' decision to leave office before expending the resources necessary to run and be competitive. Finally, age and changing life goals may force officeholders to reconsider their decision to serve in the state legislature.

After surveying several state legislators, Reeher (2006) notes that many respondents are moved to service based on the sense of satisfaction they get from working in the legislature. Most state house members are paid very little, constantly under scrutiny by the media, experience strain both personally and perhaps at home, while also facing the task of writing law (106). Legislators derive satisfaction from the job itself, from creating law, learning new information, meeting new people, and from the support they receive from their fellow legislators who experience the same trials and tribulations that they may also be facing (Reeher 2006, 105). These findings should not be interpreted to mean that a state house members life is one of sadness and misery, because they are often aware of the hardships of officeholding before running and derive a great amount of pride and happiness from serving in the legislature. These findings, however, indicate several institutional and psychological factors contribute to their tenure decisions.

In this paper, I hypothesize:

- State legislators will demonstrate high levels of civic duty and government efficacy.

They will desire to make their states and localities better places and believe they have the necessary skills to accomplish these tasks.

- State legislators will have varying beliefs about the goals of officeholding. While some believe their goal should be to advance the interests of their districts others will contend they should be serving the state as a whole. They will also disagree on whose preferences are more important, the districts' or the states'.
- Legislators will serve longer in chambers where they feel they can make a difference, where they are successfully advancing their agendas, satisfied with the institutions and resources, and have life situations that are conducive to service.

## State Legislative Career Survey

The State Legislative Career Survey was developed and administered in the spring of 2009 to better assess the questions posed in this study. A survey was designed and sent to current and former members of four state legislatures, Minnesota, Mississippi, Wisconsin, and Wyoming, who held office between 1995 and 2008.<sup>2</sup>

The theory developed in this paper postulates that members will evaluate their positions in the chamber based on the resources they are provided and their ability to be effective in accomplishing their agenda items. Furthermore, it is not just objective measures of the money they are given and the number of bills they pass, but it is their perceptions of these items that will guide their decisions to remain in the chamber or depart. Professionalization accounts for the degree to which the legislature looks like Congress, and captures variation in its institutional design and complexity. Political culture is a “particular pattern of orientation to political action in which each political system is embedded (Elazar 1984, 109).” I use political culture to assess the dominant

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<sup>2</sup>Sample selection in survey research almost always requires a trade-off between idealism and practicality. My research faces these same difficulties; sufficient resources are not present that would allow for a comprehensive sample of all fifty states to be collected. Acknowledging the challenges present in acquiring the resources necessary to conduct a fifty state survey, the instrument is designed and distributed in a sub-set of states chosen based on theoretically important attributes.

view of government's role in society, allowing me to choose states where officeholder's views toward public service may differ.

I array the forty-nine lower-chambers by their level of professionalization and political culture.<sup>3</sup> Minnesota, Mississippi, Wisconsin, and Wyoming are selected for analysis. At least one state is selected from each political culture, varying on levels of professionalization. Wisconsin and Minnesota are both dominated by the moralistic sub-culture, Wyoming is individualistic, and Mississippi, traditionalistic. In choosing at least one state from each political culture I hope to capture any variation due to the public's belief about the proper role of government in society. As noted by Elazar (1984), the dominant political cultures in some states dictate that politics be reserved for only the most elite members of society, while in others it expects all citizens to participate and become actively involved in policy making.

I employ a mixed-mode survey technique, contacting some legislators by e-mail and others by mail. Physical and e-mail addresses are gathered for all members in the four states who held office between 1995 and 2008. Information regarding the current addresses of former state legislators is gathered through a variety of public records including local newspapers, phonebooks, state records and databases, and by searching the internet. Keeping the survey instrument the same across the web and mail version of the survey, 752 surveys are distributed to legislators in the four states.

The overall response rate, including those who returned electronic and paper surveys is 30.05%; 40.56% of all legislators contacted by mail and 24.85% of all internet respondents.<sup>4</sup> Table 1 reports more detailed summary statistics, but in comparing response rates by survey distribution type a couple points warrant further discussion. First, most current officeholders receive the electronic version of the questionnaire due to the availability of email addresses for these members. Current officeholders respond less often than

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<sup>3</sup>I exclude from consideration any state that has term limits because their career decisions are not of their own choosing, but driven by an institutional rule.

<sup>4</sup>Comparing this response rate with other surveys of state legislators it is noted that 30.05% falls within a respectable range, but below the approximately 33% garnered by the Candidate Emergence Study and the 47% received by Carey et al.'s State Legislative Survey. Other surveys of state legislators have response rates ranging from 30 to 50 percent.

All Respondents				Sent	Completed	% Total	
	Sent	Completed	% Total				
Mail	249	101	40.56	Minnesota	223	66	29.60
Internet	503	125	24.85	Mississippi	190	48	25.26
	752	226	30.05	Wisconsin	194	56	28.87
				Wyoming	145	56	38.62
				Total	752	226	30.05

Current House Members			
	Sent	Completed	% Total
Mail	1	0	0
Internet	382	88	23.04
	383	88	22.98

Former House Members			
	Sent	Completed	% Total
Mail	248	101	40.73
Internet	121	37	30.58
	369	138	37.4

Table 1: Response Rates by Type of Legislator Contacted and State

their counterparts that have left the state house. These officeholders face the greatest disincentive to participate because any information, even given under the promise of anonymity, that leaks out may harm their political career. Second, the existing literature on response rates matches previous findings concerning the proclivity of respondents to return paper versus electronic surveys (Kaplowitz, Hadlock & Levine 2004, Meckel, Walters & Baugh 2005, Dillman, Smyth & Christian 2009). As demonstrated in other studies, potential respondents are more likely to return paper versus electronic questionnaires. Compounded with the disincentive for current officeholders to respond, the statistics reported in Table 1 are expected.

In all states more than twenty percent of legislators respond to surveys with the most, 38.62% responding in Wyoming and the least, 25.26% in Mississippi. These statistics do not suggest that any one state dominates the sample with each state contributing between 48 and 62 responses. These statistics also indicate that the decision to respond does not appear to be driven by state-specific characteristics that would encourage many to participate in one state and relatively none in others. Each state appears to have

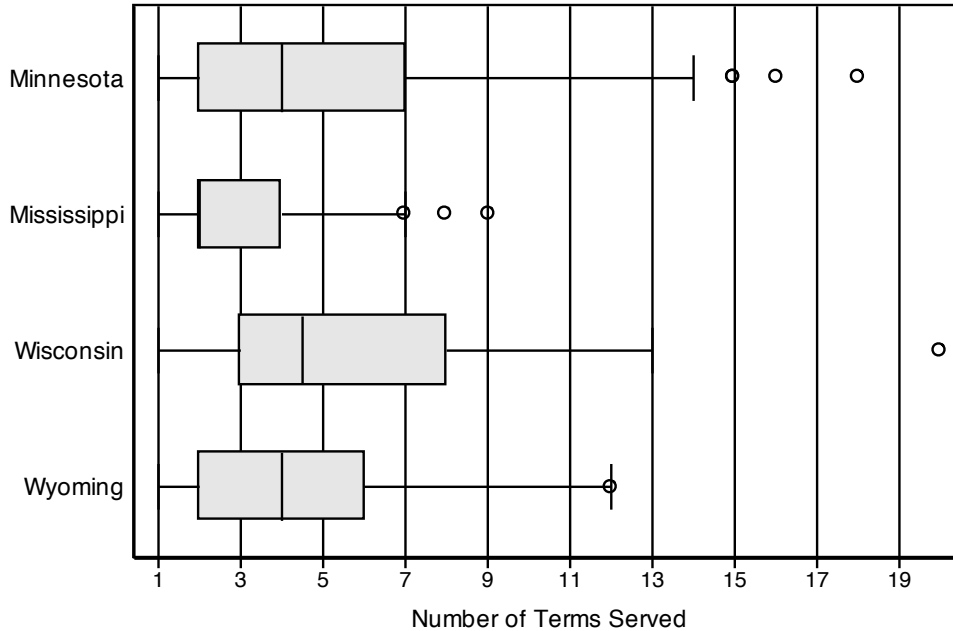


Figure 1: Number of Terms Served by Legislators in the State Legislative Career Survey

relatively similar response rates and each contributes a similar number of observations to the dataset.

## How Do Officeholders Describe Themselves?

Examining the length of state legislative careers is the first step in understanding how they view officeholding. Figure 1 depicts the number of terms served by legislators responding to this survey. The median officeholder in these four states serve between two and four terms in office before departing. This finding seems to contradict popular beliefs that legislators gain office and stay in perpetuity – many of these individuals do not serve more than four terms in office.<sup>5</sup> While four terms in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Wyoming and two terms in Mississippi correspond to eight years in the legislature, this number of often overestimated by the general population.

Attitudinally, legislators are expected to exhibit high levels of civic duty and government

<sup>5</sup>This finding is robust even when examining only former legislators. The median remains between three and five years of service, but this value for Mississippi increases to three.

efficacy – the deep desire to help their communities in states. This conjecture has received support in legislative interviews and is expected if many officeholders are asked to give-up lucrative careers in private practice to serve in a legislature where they are likely to receive fewer tangible benefits (Reeher 2006). The literature reveals that feelings of civic duty and government efficacy commonly contribute to legislators’ decisions to enter into elections and their decisions to stay in office. The desire to change public policy, serve one’s community, advance a political career, gain better business and social contacts, and appease their party leaders often motivate legislators to seek office (Moncrief 1999, Gaddie 2004, Fox & Lawless 2005, Reeher 2006).

Based on theory developed by the literature I ask legislators to identify how well they agree or disagree with each of the following six statements:

- I believe politics and holding public office are careers.
- I hold this office because I want to influence public policy.
- I hold this office because I want to give back to my community.
- I hold this office because it will help me advance my political career.
- I hold this office because it will increase my business and social contacts.
- I hold this office because my party asked me to run.

Legislators most often agreed, either strongly or somewhat, that the desire to influence public policy motivated them to hold office. Approximately 97% of respondents indicate impacting the creation of laws attracts them to serve in the legislature. About 94% of respondents also agree, either strongly or somewhat, that the ability to give back to their communities drives their decision to seek elected office. Receiving far less support is the notion legislators serve to increase their business and social contacts (about 70% strongly or somewhat disagree with the statement). Legislators, however, are more divided in their support for the effect parties and holding office as a career have on their decision to serve in the legislature. While slightly over half of respondents disagree with the statement they hold office because their party asked them to run, about a third agree. Party seems

to be a relevant force for some people's service in the state house. This same trend is mirrored in responses to the statement holding public office is a career. About a third of respondents agree with this statement while close to half disagree. It is also important to note that approximately 21% of respondents neither agree nor disagree with either statement, that they hold office because the party asked them to run or because they believe service can be a career.

Examining differences in responses among current and former legislators reveals few differences between groups. There is little variation among responses to the statements about holding office as a career, to influence public policy, and to give back to the community, however, a few minor differences are noted between the sub-samples on the remaining questions. Those legislators who have left office indicate that they held office to increase their business and social contacts at slightly higher levels than those currently serving. The same trend is witnessed among past and present members concerning the decision to hold office to advance their political careers. Finally, more former legislators indicate the party's desire to see them run influenced their decision to hold office more than those currently serving. It should be noted, however, that these differences are small and in many cases not statistically significant.

Using the variation in the number of terms served by the respondents as leverage demonstrates how officeholders evaluate these statements may change with the length of time they serve. Figure 2 reports the percentage of respondents in each term that agree or disagree with the statement holding public office is a career. As expected, higher rates of disagreement are correlated with fewer terms in office while people who more strongly support this statement serve longer. Legislators, current and former, who indicated strong disagreement with this statement did not serve more than a couple terms. Those who continued in office identified they neither agreed nor disagreed, or only somewhat agreed, that politics may be their career. Figure 3 supports the aggregate findings, regardless of length of time a legislator remained in office the ability to influence public policy is a motivating force for holding office. No respondent disagreed that they held office to

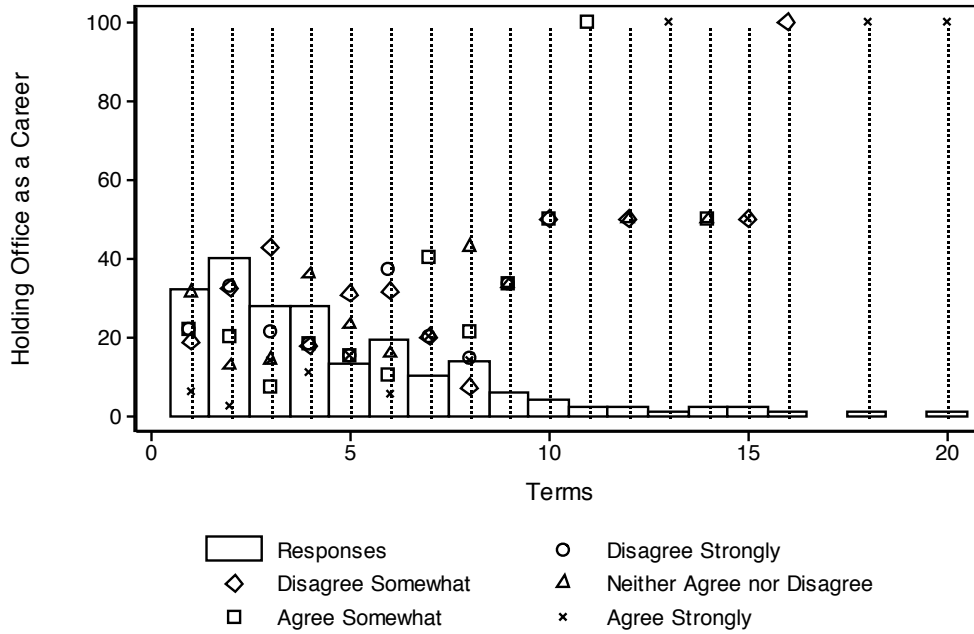


Figure 2: Responses to Holding Office as a Political Career by Number of Terms Served

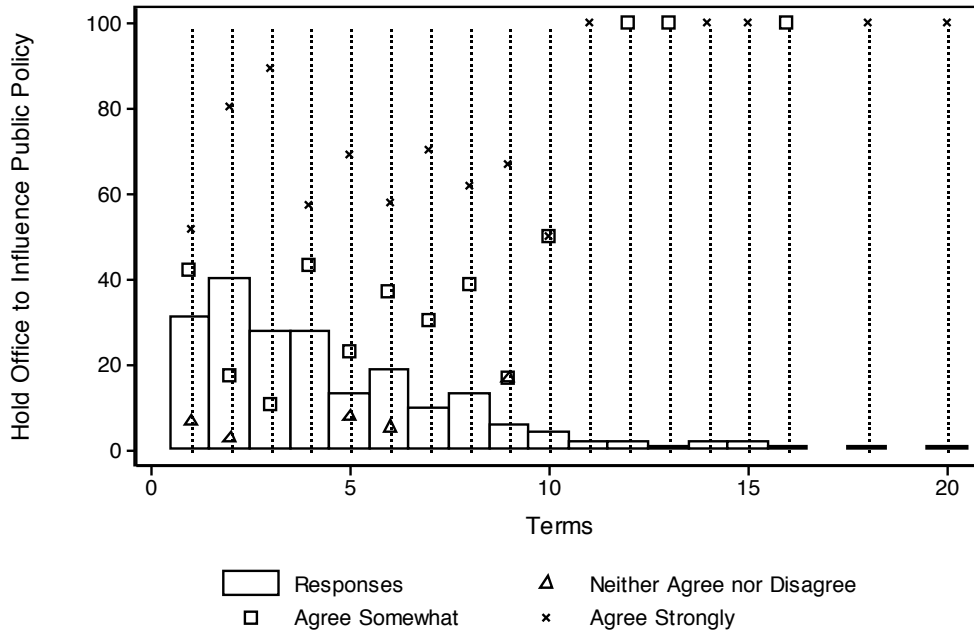


Figure 3: Responses to Holding Office to Influence Public Policy by Number of Terms Served



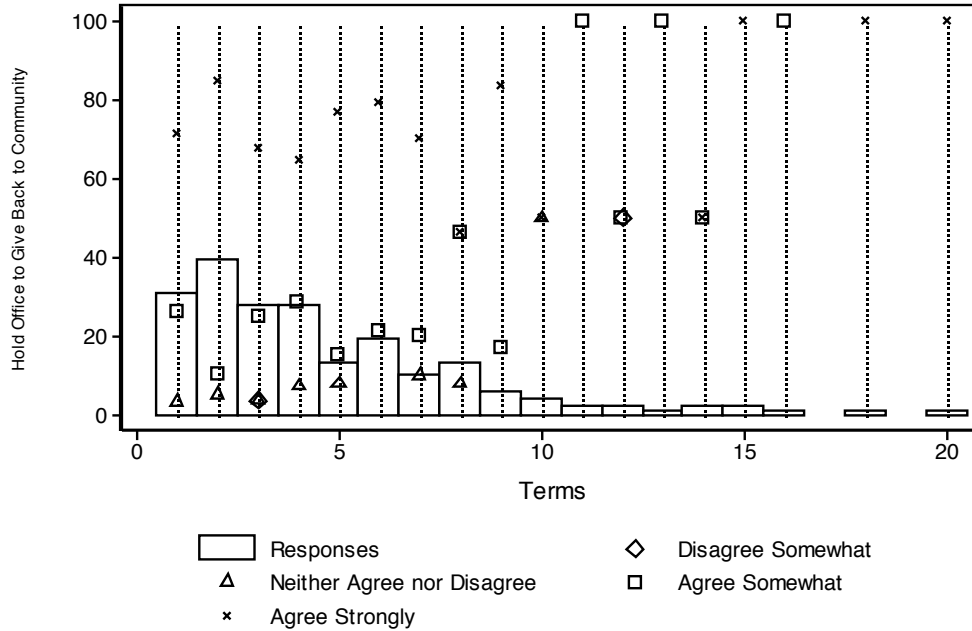


Figure 4: Responses to Holding Office to Give Back to the Community by Number of Terms Served

influence public policy, and across the range of terms served, fifty percent or more of the respondents strongly indicate this is why they occupied their legislative seat. Similar results are witnessed in Figure 4, where most all respondents regardless of the number of terms they serve indicate high support for public service as motivating their desire to be in the house. Legislators who neither agreed nor disagreed served at most ten terms in office whereas those who continue beyond this point indicate higher levels of agreement with this statement.

Turning to the final three variables, Figure 5 shows high levels of disagreement for holding office to advance political careers across the number of terms legislators served. Those respondents who agree with the statement, service in the house is part of a larger agenda, reach a peak in the second through fourth term and decline through the remainder of the sample. This could be due to their exit from office to move to higher position or the realization that they are unlikely to move-up and the decision to either retire or make a career out of service to the house. Figure 6 also reveals wide-spread disagreement

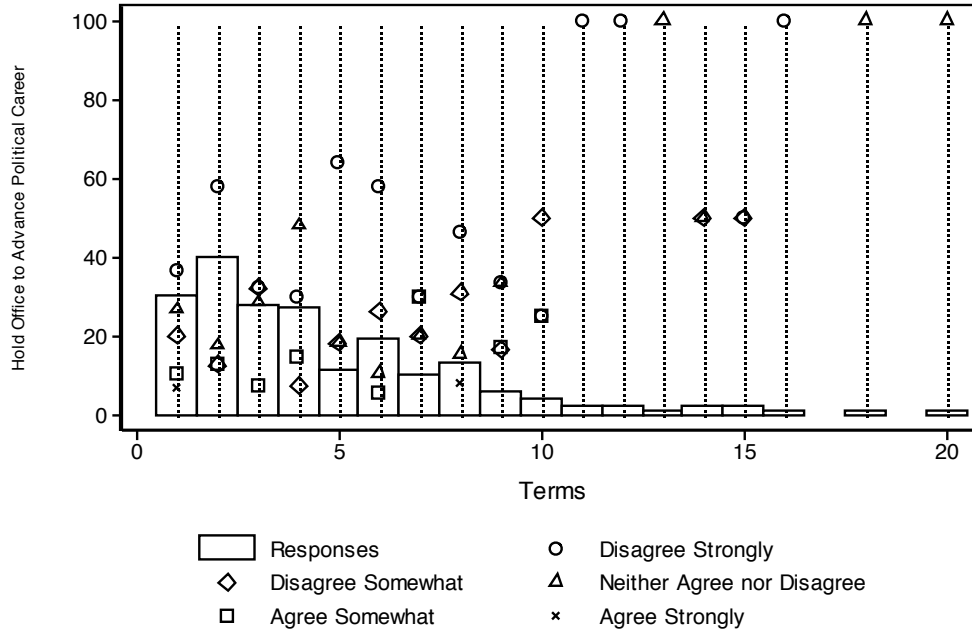


Figure 5: Responses to Holding Office to Advance Political Career by Number of Terms Served

with the statement holding office is part of members' plans to increase their business and social contacts. The greatest amount of support is witnessed for this statement among legislators who served only a couple terms, with agreement significantly diminishing after five. Like those officeholders who sought office to advance their political careers, legislators who agree with this statement could either lose interest or the ability to benefit from continued service after a few years in the house. These officeholders could enter for a short period, build their portfolios, and attempt to profit from these connections in the business, consulting, or lobbying worlds. Regardless of the reason, disagreement with holding office to increase business and social contacts increases with the length of time legislators serve. Finally, party pressure seems to have a variable effect across the number of terms legislators have been in the house, as witnessed in Figure 7. While a high percentage of respondents across the number of terms served strongly and somewhat disagree that party influences their decision to hold office, it continues to have a persistent effect across the range of observations.

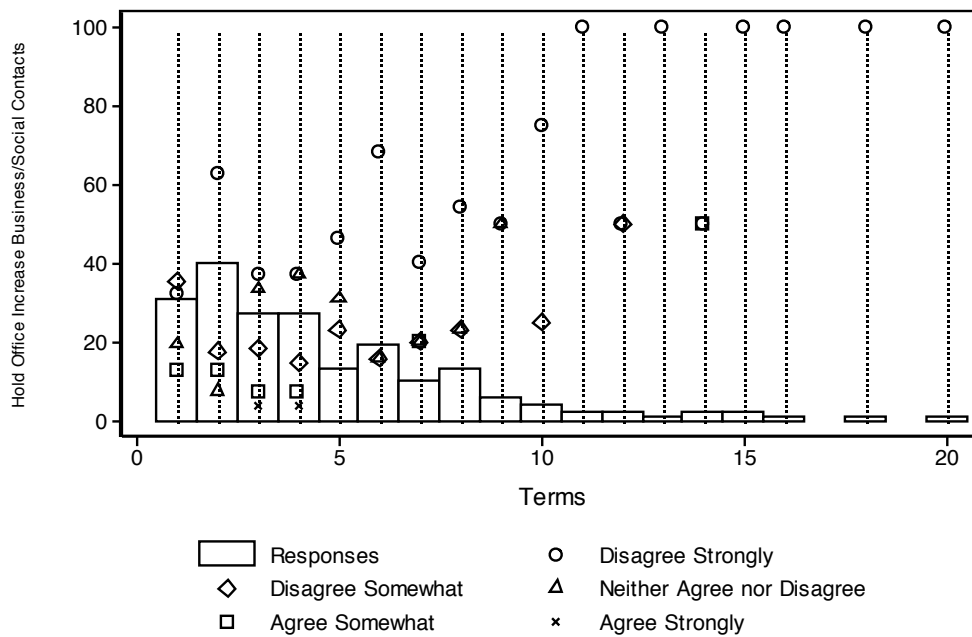


Figure 6: Responses to Holding Office to Advance Business and Social Contacts by Number of Terms Served

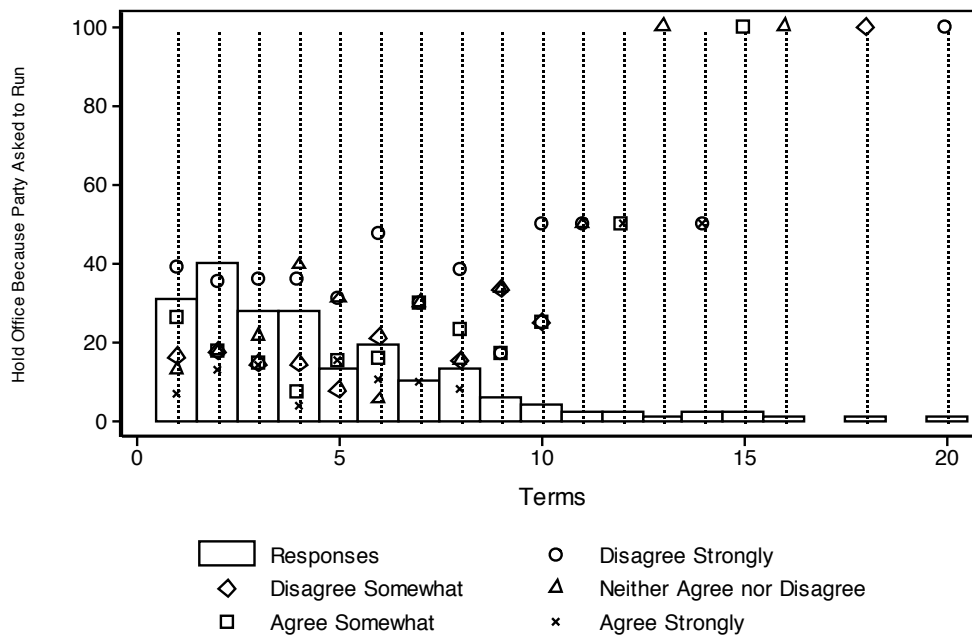


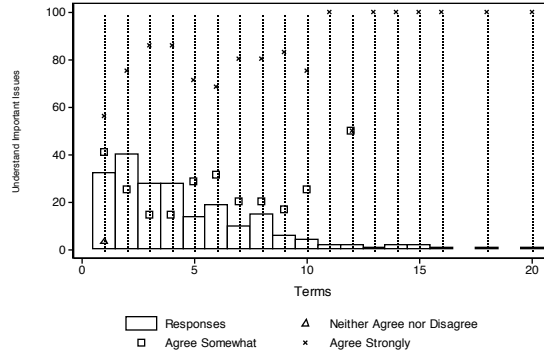
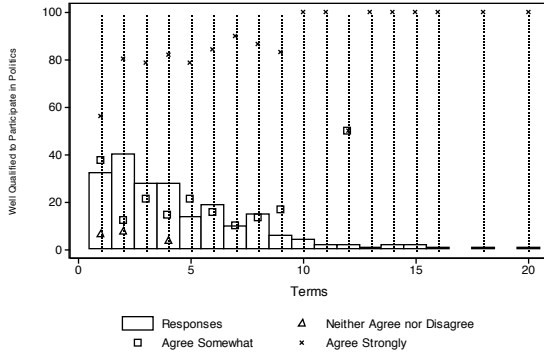
Figure 7: Responses to Holding Office Because Party Asked to Serve by Number of Terms Served

Examining these first few questions reveals legislators who hold office to give back to their communities and influence public policy. Officeholders, however, are not monolithic – they are drawn to public service for a variety of reasons. Some respondents indicate being swayed by the potential of increasing their business and social contacts, having a successful political career, and fulfilling the needs of their party. These later individuals, however, do not typify most officeholders. I do not suggest that civic duty alone motivates the decisions of officeholder and those subsequent decisions they make, but after analyzing several measures of the concept, note their propensity to advocate these believes cannot be overlooked.

Legislators' perceived ability to be effective, make a difference, and impact policy is also expected to motivate career decisions. Bernick's (2001) career anchor theory states that legislators, like other employees, will look for positions where they gain satisfaction. Once this post is found they are only likely to move to another job if the expected benefit of the new position is greater than the cost of giving up their current status. It is necessary for legislators to believe they are capable of working within the framework of the chamber to accomplish goals. Barber's (1965) description of lawmakers does not indicate any type of officeholder that does not believe they have the ability to be effective at some level, whether it is to accomplish a personal or district goal.

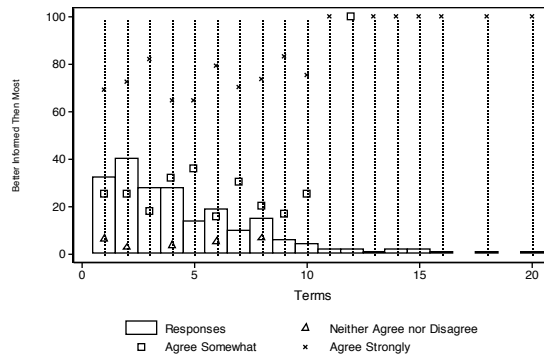
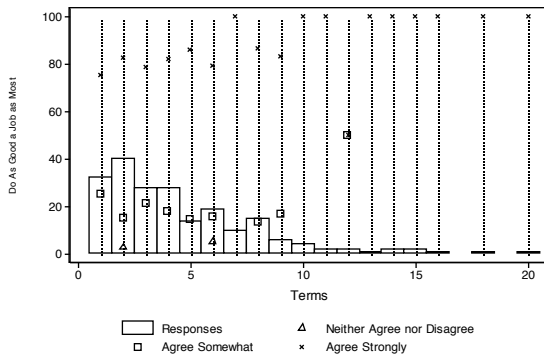
I rely on a series of four questions developed by the National Election Study to measure internal political efficacy. These questions are routinely used and are both reliable and valid measures of the concept (Craig, Niemi & Silver 1990, Niemi, Craig & Mattei 1991). The questions ask respondents to what degree they agree or disagree with the following statements:

- I consider myself to be well qualified to participate in politics.
- I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country.
- I feel that I could do as good a job in public office as most other people.
- I think that I am better informed about politics and government than most people.



(a) Consider Self to be Well Qualified to Participate in Politics

(b) Understand Important Issues Facing Country



(c) Do As Good a Job in Office as Most People

(d) Better Informed about Politics and Government Than Most

Figure 8: Respondent's Level of Internal Political Efficacy by Number of Terms Served

Examining responses, no respondent indicated they disagreed with any of the statements; the range of answers extends from neither disagree nor agree to strongly agree. Legislators, for the most part, find themselves to be effective at government participation. Additionally, strongly agree is the modal value for each of the questions, the highest value possible. The average legislator does not just evaluate themselves as being able to be effective at participation, but strongly believes this truth. An additive measure of the four individual questions is also created with similar statistics found.<sup>6</sup> The median value of this summary variable is also its highest value.

Figure 8 further demonstrates a high level of political efficacy across the range of

<sup>6</sup>Confirmatory factor analysis reveals each of these four questions load on a single, rotated factor, each with eigenvalues in excess of 0.47. In no case did any of these questions load more heavily on another factor.

terms served by officeholders in this study. Over 60% of respondents strongly agreed with each of the questions regardless of the length of time they had been in the house. State legislators believe they are well-situated to serve in office – they believe they are qualified, understand the important issues, can do as good a job as most, and are better informed about politics and government. Examining current versus former officeholders and those who had served only a few terms in office versus those who served twenty reveals little variation in political efficacy.

## **How Do Officeholders Describe Their Jobs?**

Legislative careers are more than attitudes toward service, civic duty, and government efficacy, but the ability to find pleasure in working in the state house (Bernick 2001). How legislators evaluate their positions is expected to vary on their approach to officeholding, their decision to specialize in one policy area, their attitudes toward the chamber’s committee system, rules, training, and resources, the success they have in advancing their agenda, and those factors that motivate them to leave office.

Legislator’s decision to do what is in the best interest of their district or state is one of the most fundamental questions they will have to answer in approaching their job. Are they sent to the statehouse to be a veracious advocate for their local community or as a representative with the duty to accomplish what is best for the entire state even at the expense of their district? Respondents are asked to identify on a seven-point scale, “As a state legislator, did you feel you should be primarily concerned with looking after the needs of your district, or the needs of the state as a whole?”. Figure 9 illustrates that most legislators believe they need to be concerned equally with both. Approximately 47% of respondents identified the median position as their primary concern while about 4% indicated the district, and 7% the state as their chief responsibility. Comparing current to former legislators does not reveal any significant differences in these results and regardless of the number of terms served, respondents do not vary on these views. Most state

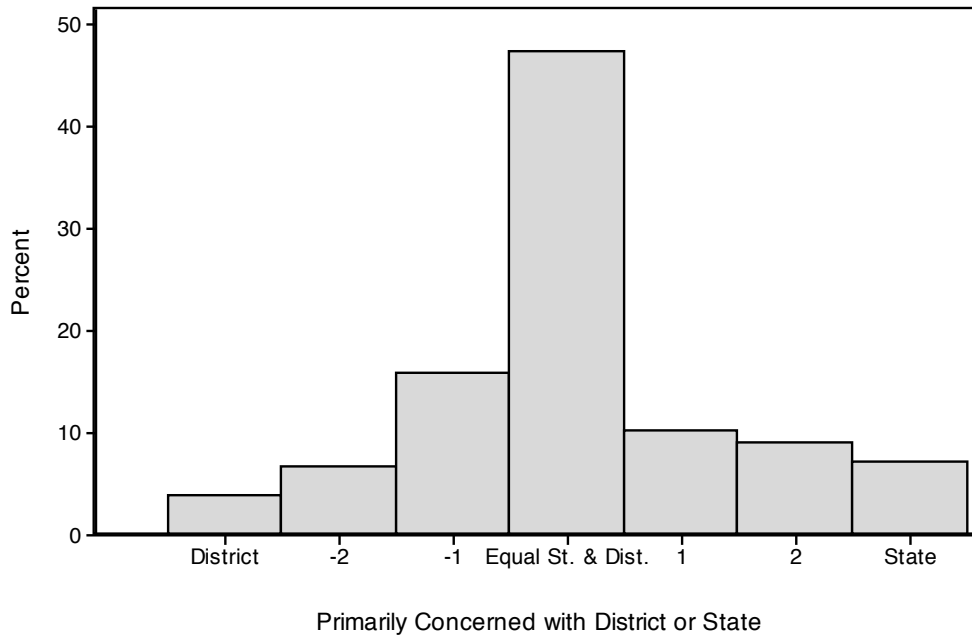


Figure 9: Legislators as Primarily Representative of their Districts or the State as a Whole

legislators are seeking to balance the needs of the district with those of the state. Only a few leaning strongly toward either side.

Figure 10 poses a slightly more difficult question to lawmakers, “When there was conflict between what you felt was best and what you thought the district wanted, did you think you should follow your own conscience or follow what the people in your district wanted?”. Responses to this question reveal a more skewed distribution, with lawmaker’s consciences winning over their district’s preferences at relatively high levels. Approximately 51% of respondents leaned more toward their conscience than the district, while 30% indicate they try to split the difference between the competing values. Only 18% lean more toward their district in those cases where conflicts arise. Examining current versus former officeholders, no substantive differences are seen – each value their own conscience in making decisions over the district’s ideals. Respondents who had served longer seem to lean more toward their own consciences than those who have been in office only a few terms. Overall, some variation is present in determining whose interests win in the case of a conflict, but most lean toward their own preferences than those of their

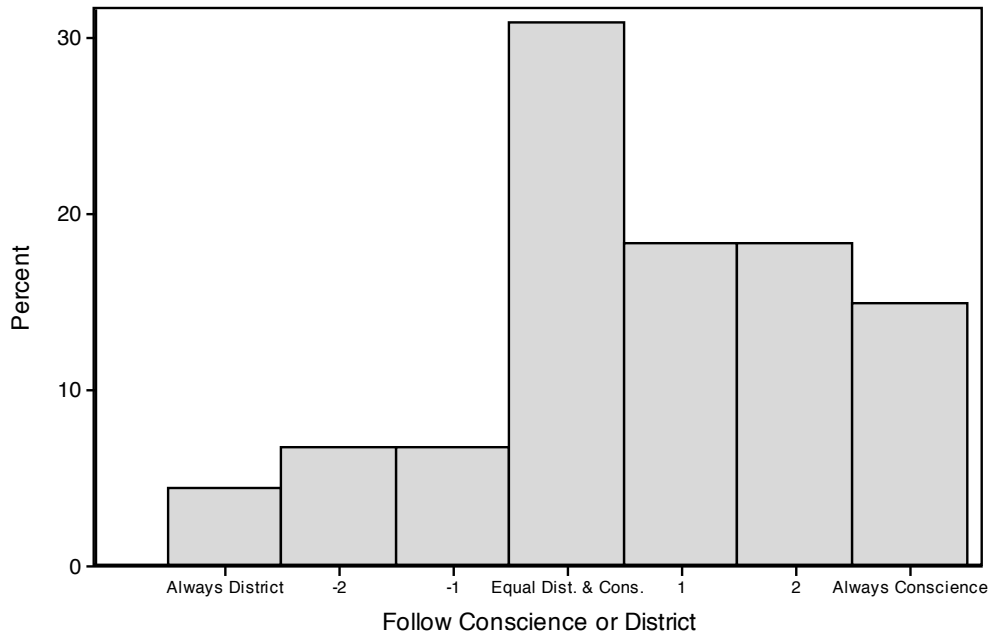


Figure 10: Follow Conscience or District Interests

district.

The decision to specialize in one issue area or work actively in many policy questions is another dimension where legislators may differ. Respondents are asked to identify on a seven-point scale the degree to which they specialize in a single policy area or work on many policy projects. Figure 11 indicates about 46% of legislators lean more toward many policy areas than focusing on just one or two. Only 2% report focusing on a single policy and 30% indicate they try to find a middle ground between working on too many and too few. While little variation exists between the responses of current and former legislators, those officeholders who had left the chamber report spending time on many projects whereas those who are currently serving are more normally distributed across the range. Examining these statistics across the number of terms served reveals little variation – officeholders who have been in the house for a number of terms follow the same general patterns as shown in Figure 11. Legislators tend to favor working on more versus fewer policies, with only a small number choosing to focus intensely on a single item.

Institutional rules and norms play critical roles in determining how legislators evaluate



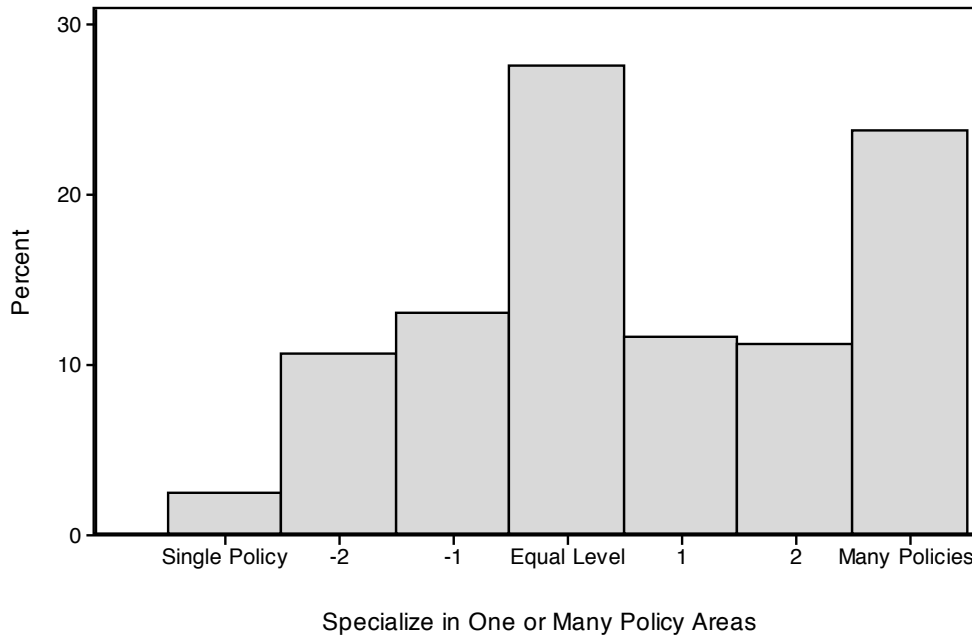
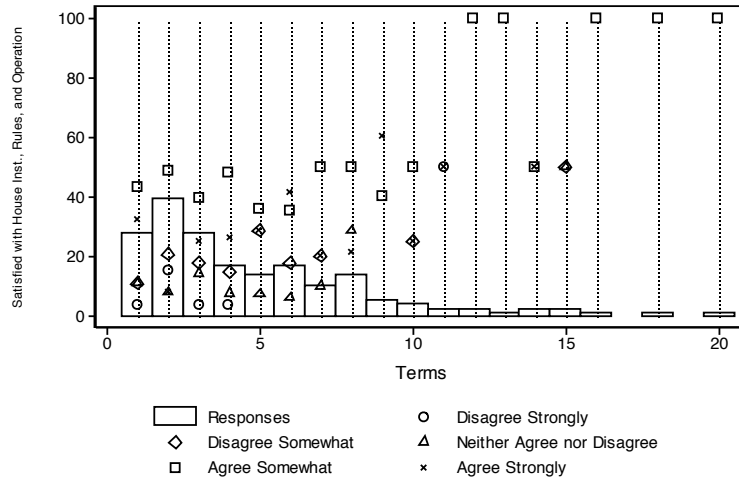


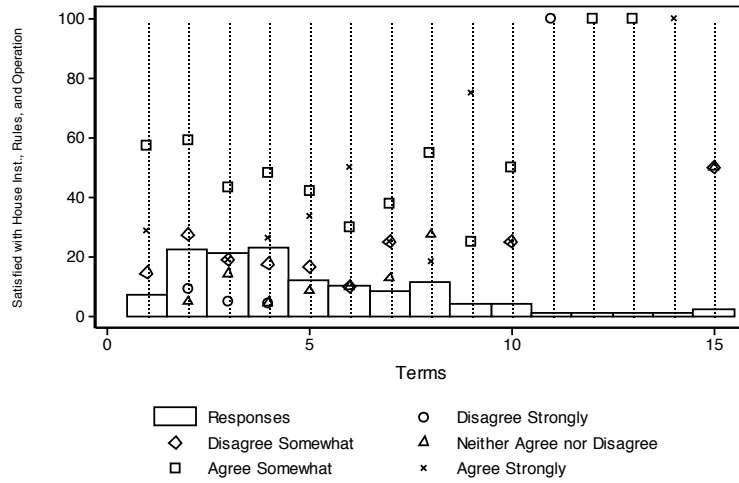
Figure 11: Decision to Focus on a Single Policy Area or Many

their positions and determine to remain in the chamber. Legislators are asked the degree to which they agree or disagree with the statement: “Overall, I am satisfied with the institutions, rules, and operation of the House or Assembly”. On the whole approximately 25% strongly agree with this statement and 45% agree somewhat. Only 10% neither agrees nor disagrees and 20% disagrees. Figure 12 indicates, quite predictably, that members who have served longer agree most strongly with this statement. Interesting to note, however, is the difference that emerges when looking at those respondents who currently serve in office versus those who have left. Far more dissatisfaction is found among those legislators who have already departed the chamber.

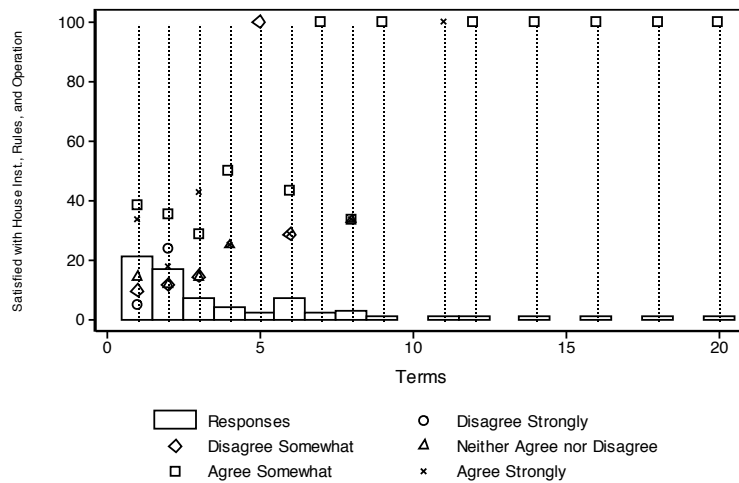
Examining committees specifically, it is found that about 71% of respondents agree with the statement: “I am satisfied with my committee positions in the House or Assembly”. Five percent indicate they are very dissatisfied and about 10% are somewhat dissatisfied, but the large majority of legislators indicate positive feelings toward their committee assignments. This finding is consistent across those members who have left the legislature and those who still remain. Approximately 70% of each group agree with the statement.



(a) All Respondents



(b) Former Legislators Only



(c) Current Legislators Only

Figure 12: Overall Satisfaction with House Institutions, Rules, and Operation

Looking at responses to this question as a function of the number of terms served reveals that more dissatisfaction is claimed by those who have served fewer than eight terms, but few legislators indicate any displeasure after this point.

Having the ability to advance to a leadership position and become more influential in the chamber may also influence the career decisions members make. Sixty-five percent of all respondents agree with the statement: “I believe that I will have the opportunity to advance to a leadership position and become more influential in the chamber”. Only 16% disagree they are unlikely to advance to leadership positions or become more influential. These results do not vary when comparing current to former officeholders with about 67% of current legislators agreeing compared to 63% of retired house members. As expected, the more terms served by legislators the more likely they are to believe leadership positions are in their future. This finding is in keeping with the emphasis placed on seniority in many institutions. Officeholders of every type harbor some belief that leadership posts and the accumulation of influence is likely in their bodies.

Legislative resources allow members to advance their agendas and it is expected that the more they have access to the longer they will either stay in the post or desire to move up the career ladder. Respondents are asked the degree they agree or disagree: “The legislature provided me with sufficient resources to accomplish my legislative workload”. Overall, 36% of lawmakers strongly agreed with this statement, followed by 46% indicating they somewhat agree, 4% neither agree nor disagree, 12% disagree somewhat, and 2% disagree strongly. While it might be expected that former members are less favorable toward the resources they were provided, no such pattern exists in these data. Only 2% separate the levels of agreement among members of these two sub-groups. Figure 13 indicates, however, that more approval corresponds to longer service. It is in the first few terms where members indicate some level of displeasure with the resources they are given, but as they accumulate more seniority (and likely, more resources) they begin approving of this aspect of the institution at higher levels.

Given the resources legislators are provided, their committee assignments, and their

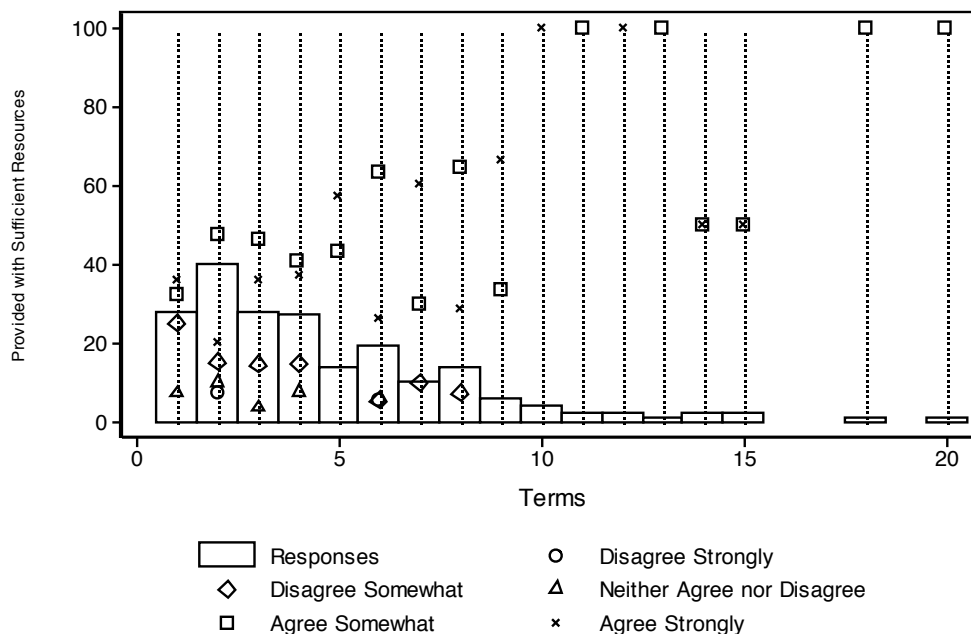


Figure 13: Legislature Provides Sufficient Resources to Members

ability to become influential, how successful are they at passing legislation? Three questions are posed to officeholders to assess this question. First, respondents are asked how successful they are getting bills and amendments past that were important to them. Second, how successful they had been at passing bills and amendments they sponsored. Finally, the degree to which they felt their involvement in the legislature had made a difference in terms of public policy. About 17% of legislators responded that they were successful almost all the time passing bills and amendments that were important to them. Forty percent indicated they were successful a majority of the time, while 34% were successful about as often as unsuccessful and about 8% report being unsuccessful most or all the time. Looking at current versus former officeholders reveals that 62% of former versus 50% of current legislators indicate they are successful over half the time getting bills and amendments passed that they find important. Perhaps this could signal that once their agenda has been accomplished lawmakers begin leaving the chamber. This difference, however, could reflect the desire of former members to positively evaluate their contribution to state policy. Examining these trends over time reveals another

interesting point; only after five terms in office do a majority of respondents indicate they are successful at passing favored legislation over half the time.

Passing sponsored legislation reveals a similar story. Fifteen percent of officeholders report they are successful nearly all the time, 36% a majority of the time, 35% about as often as not, 13% less than a majority of the time, and about 1% are unsuccessful almost all the time. The same trend is witnessed between current and former legislators with those who have left reporting higher levels of passage in bills and amendments they sponsor. In addition, it is not until five terms in office that over fifty percent of respondents indicate they are able to pass a majority of the legislation they propose. Finally, respondents are asked how much they agree their involvement in the legislature makes a difference in terms of public policy. About 95% of lawmakers somewhat or strongly agree that they make a difference in the creation of the state’s laws. Only four respondents disagree somewhat with this statement and seven neither agree nor disagree. People who serve, or have served, believe that their involvement in government has mattered. This finding is mirrored when looking across current and former legislators as well as across those who have served only a few as opposed to many legislative terms.

Table 2: Reasons for Retiring from the House

	Yes	No	Modal Response
Primary Challenger	2.44	79.27	No
General Reelection	3.66	78.05	No
Redistricting	6.10	75.61	No
Accomplished Everything	21.95	59.76	No
Family Considerations	37.80	43.90	No
Personal Health	4.88	76.83	No
Financial Considerations	15.85	65.85	No
Frustration with the House	14.63	67.07	No
Frustration with Government	17.07	64.63	No
Return to Occupation	14.63	67.07	No
Left for New Occupation	10.98	70.73	No
Retired Completely	29.27	52.44	No

Cells are the percentage respondents answering yes or no

Finally, what causes lawmakers to leave office? After evaluating the literature, I posed

a number of questions to those respondents of my survey who no longer served in the house. Table 2 reveals some surprising results: very few legislators identify any of the previous explanation for legislative retirement as important in their own decision-making processes.<sup>7</sup> These findings do not conform to the literature's theories of legislative retirement; however, these percentages and medians may not tell the whole story.

Figure 14 reports interesting variation in factors effecting the decision to leave office as a function of the number of terms served. Regardless of the number of terms served the possibility of a strong primary fight, the effect of redistricting altering members' districts, and their health played little role in the decision to leave office. The possibility of facing a difficult general reelection bid, however, does seem to account for some legislators' decisions to leave the longer they have served. This same time-dependent trend is found with regard to legislators who accomplish all they have set-out to do in public office, those who are frustrated with the chamber and government and politics generally, those who are leaving to return to their previous job or leaving to take a new post, and those who are seeking to retire from both public and private life. In the aggregate, legislators may not leave office because of any one of these items, but their effect may be better understood in relation to the length of time legislators have been in office.

## **What Determines Legislative Career Lengths?**

This final section builds on these attitudinal indicators to model state legislative careers. How long people serve in office is expected to be influenced by how they approach the job of officeholding, how they evaluate the institutions and rules of their chamber, and how successful they feel they have been accomplishing their agenda. I expect legislators motivated by the desire to give back to their communities and create good public policy to serve longer, similar to those demonstrating high levels of internal political efficacy,

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<sup>7</sup>It should be noted that I am examining only those legislators who voluntarily retired from office, not including those who lost their reelection bid. Former legislators who lost their reelection campaigns retired not based on their own rationed judgment, but based on the will of their constituencies.

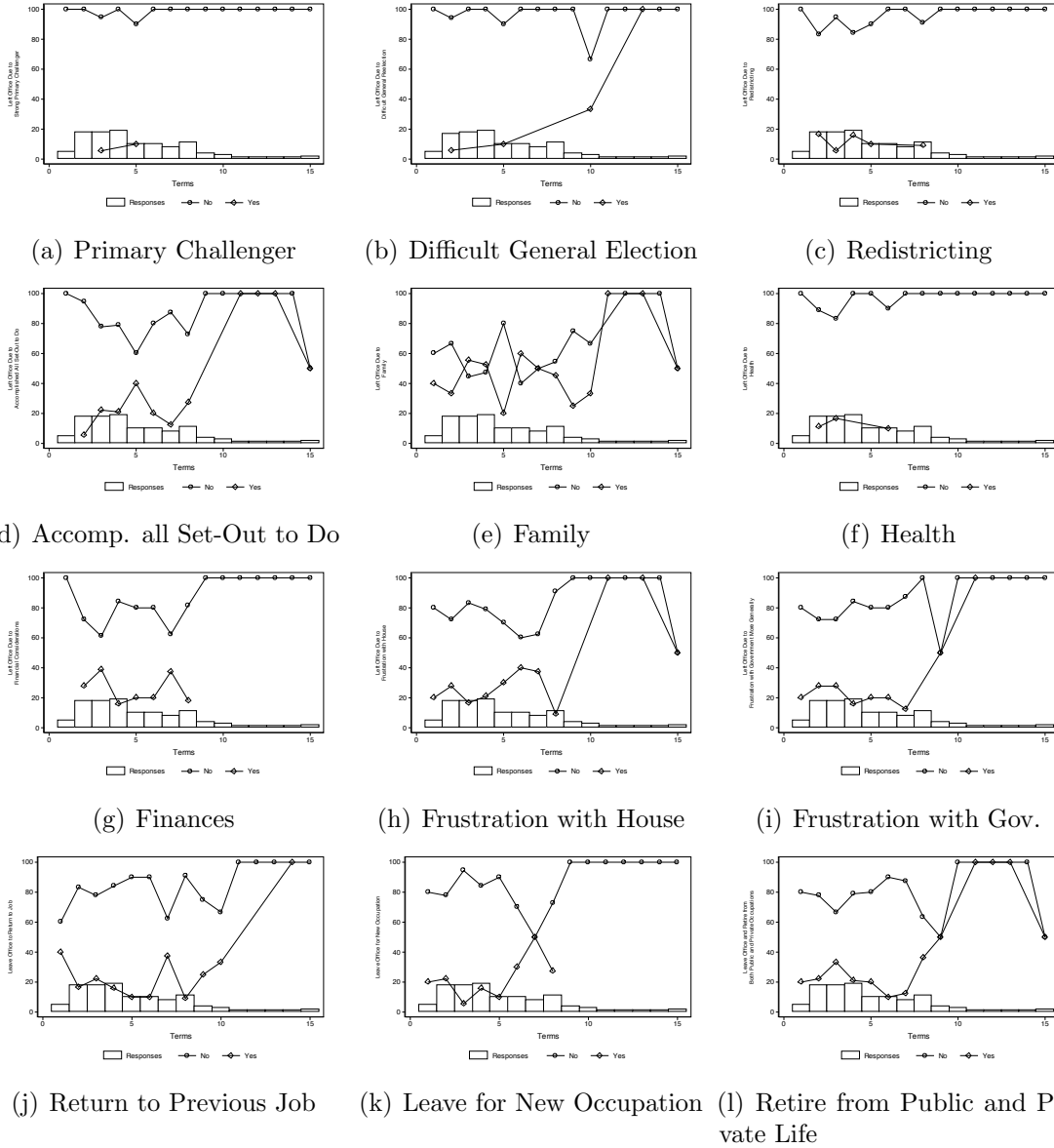


Figure 14: Factors Accounting for the Decision to Retire from Office

and who believe they are well qualified and equipped to participate in politics by holding office. I expect respondents' desire to benefit their future careers by increasing their social networks and working to make politics a career will be negatively associated with the number of terms served as they should enter office and leave quickly once their objectives are achieved. Legislators who evaluate the resources they are provided positively, indicate they are able to pass legislation they find important, and provided with sufficient resources to make a difference in the institution and its subsequent policy are also expected to serve

longer than members who evaluate these items more negatively.

Using the responses the State Legislative Career Survey, I model the number of terms served by respondents as the product of these attitudes. Several summary measures are used to map questions onto broader categories. *Duty to the public* combines members' attitudes toward holding office to influence public policy and give back to their communities, whereas *desire to advance self* collapses attitudes toward holding office to advance a political career, increase business and social contacts, and holding office as a career. *Political efficacy* is measured as before, with legislators being asked if they consider themselves well qualified to participate in politics, feel they have a good understand of the important issues, are able to do as good a job as most other people, and are informed about politics and government. Legislators are also asked if they favor the district's interests or the state's and their own consciences when making policy determinations. *View officeholding* combines responses to these questions with lower values indicating viewing officeholding as a delegate, relaying the preferences of your district to the legislature. Higher values indicate officeholders who instead place emphasis on their interpretation of the state's best interests and their own conscience. *Satisfied with institutions* assesses how positively members perceive the institutions, rules, and operation of the chamber, their committee positions, and their ability to advance to leadership positions. Success in passing bills that you found important or that you sponsor is measured in *legislative success*. Finally, *resources* combines legislators' satisfaction with the resources they are provided and believe that their involvement makes a difference in terms of public policy.<sup>8</sup>

Legislator's characteristics and life circumstances are also expected to play a role in how long they serve. Nine explanatory variables commonly cited in the literature are included in this analysis accounting for the incentive structure each socio-demographic group may face as well as other financial, personal, and familial commitments they may have. A dummy variable is included to indicate if the respondent is male and another to indicate if they are non-white. A categorical variable reports the income-level of each

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<sup>8</sup>Factor analysis confirms that these questions load on common dimensions with no question loading more strongly on any other dimension than the one indicated.



legislator and measures of party identification and ideology are also made. Respondent's level of education and age are also included as are dummy variables indicating if they are married and have children.

Negative binomial regression analysis is used to measure the relative effects of the independent variables on legislators' term lengths.<sup>9</sup> I include state dummy variables in the model to account for any variation in the number of terms served that may be due to state-level factors not identified. I also employ robust standard errors clustered by the respondents' status as a current or former legislator to account for any heteroscedasticity that may be present in the calculation of the standard errors.

Table 3 indicates that a number of attitudes play a statistically significant role in determining the length of legislative careers. Political efficacy, satisfaction with the chamber's institutions and operation, legislative success, positive evaluations of the resources provided, and taking a more broad and personal view toward officeholding increase the number of terms legislators are likely to remain in office. Men and individuals of higher age were also likely to serve longer than women and younger respondents. Surprisingly, legislators' level of civic duty is negatively associated with the number of terms served in this multivariate analysis as are married officeholders and those with children. Legislator's desire to advance their own self interests by seeking the position to advance their political careers, use the office as a launching point for higher office, and to increase their social and business contacts is not related to the number of terms served.

Legislator's feelings of duty to the public, their belief that they hold office to influence public policy and give back to their communities is a surprising result indicating a negative relationship with the number of terms served. It was expected that people who exhibit high levels of civic duty would be incentivized to remain in the legislature longer, but these results indicate that a one-unit increase in this attitude results in a 9.5% reduction in the number of terms served. One possible explanation for this result is the nature of

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<sup>9</sup>Negative binomial regression is chosen due to the characteristics of the survey sample, a count of the number of terms served by respondents. Fitting a Poisson regression to the data reveals a significant amount of overdispersion. Additional information about the method can be found in Long (1997), Hilbe (2007), and Greene (2007).

Table 3: Negative Binomial Regression of the Number of Terms Served by Legislators

	Coef.	Robust Standard Errors	
Duty to Public	-0.0998	0.0131	**
Desire to Advance Self	-0.0048	0.0206	
Political Efficacy	0.0778	0.0218	**
View Officeholding	0.0350	0.0168	*
Satisfied with Institutions	0.0231	0.0107	*
Legislative Success	0.0560	0.0072	**
Resources	0.0593	0.0217	**
Male	0.0937	0.0376	*
Non-White	-0.3395	0.5008	
Income	0.1201	0.0697	
PID	-0.0103	0.0527	
Ideology	-0.0764	0.0465	
Education	0.0140	0.0536	
Age	0.1968	0.0893	*
Married	-0.0595	0.0223	**
Child	-0.2528	0.0337	**
MN	0.3201	0.2116	
MS	-0.1963	0.0288	**
WI	0.4073	0.1470	**
Constant	0.1898	0.7106	
N = 169			
$\alpha = 0.07578^{**}$			
Clusters = 2			
** p<0.01, * p<0.05			

officeholding in the face of this idealism. People who hold office to create good public policy and serve their communities may be discouraged by the sometimes lethargic legislative process, the money and campaigning involved in remaining in the chamber, and the method by which the house operates. Conversely, it could be these qualities that prompt individuals to enter for a couple terms, accomplish their policy objective represent their hometowns and depart not viewing long-term service as a desirable goal.

Political efficacy is positively related to the number of terms served, as expected by the theory. A unit increase in legislators' level of political efficacy corresponds to an 8.1% increase in the number of terms served. Additionally, as officeholders view their job as

relying on their own conscious and evaluations of the state's best interests the number of terms served increases by 3.6%. Legislators who go to the statehouse to represent the interests of only the district do not stay in office long – it is more than mimicking the hometown's preferences in the statehouse that cause people to stay in office, they must also bring their own good judgement to bear on policy decisions. Absent this approach to holding office, legislators are destined to serve only a couple terms before departing. It is also necessary that officeholders be satisfied with the institutions and rules of the chamber as well as their committee assignments. A one-unit increase in the satisfaction members have toward the rules, structure, and norms of the house is associated with a 2.4% increase in the number of terms served. The ability to be successful advancing policies important to members and those that they sponsor also positively influences the number of terms served. Substantively, a unit increase in perceptions toward legislative success is associated with a 5.7% increase in the number of terms served. The same positive trend is found examining perceptions toward the resources members are provided – a more positive evaluation increases the number of terms served 6.1%.

Socio-economic factors also have statistically significant effects on the number of terms legislators serve. Men serve 9.9% longer than women among those officeholders surveyed. This finding conforms to the existing literature noting the underrepresentation of women in legislatures and the sometimes infrequent, but growing, number of women with seniority occupying places of leadership in the chamber. A one year increase in respondents' age is associated with a 23.6% increase in the length of time they serve. Most legislatures are not overrun with young members, but instead are occupied by individuals who are older than population median, a finding mirrored in these results. Many officeholders, especially in less-professional legislatures, decide to enter politics later in life and once seniority begins to accumulate decide to remain in office.<sup>10</sup> Finally, personal and family commitments are found to lower the number of terms served by legislators with being

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<sup>10</sup>It should also be noted that these results may be driven by a small number of older respondents and more data would decrease the substantive effect of age. A squared-term was also introduced into the model to account for any nonlinearity in age that may be present in the data. This measure failed to achieve statistical significance and has been omitted from the model.

married decreasing length of service 5.9% and having children, 7.9%. The greater number of family commitments officeholders face the less likely they are to stay in office for a substantial length of time.

## Conclusions

The popular perception of legislators in the United States today is not flattering. They are often described as self-interested, corrupt, and unable to compromise and do what is in the best interest of the state and nation. This belief is mirrored in public polling information that indicates almost all legislatures have approval ratings below fifty percent. While the public is quick to decry these individuals and institutions, we know only a little about how they view themselves, their evaluations of their chambers, and those factors that motivate their career paths. Some members of the legislature enter office and serve a couple terms before departing while others devote their entire lives to the chamber – what explains this variation?

To gain leverage over these questions a survey is conducted of current and former legislators in four states. These results reveal officeholders who are motivated by the desire to create good public policy and serve their local communities. Disaggregating attitudes to holding office reveals few who identify serving to increase their business or social contacts and advance their careers. Almost universally, respondents indicate high levels of political efficacy and the belief they are well-equipped to make policy. How legislators view their districts may vary with some choosing to place emphasis on their role as a delegate, passing along the preferences of their constituencies while others place more emphasis on their own judgement. Examining attitudes by the number of terms served also reveals interesting trends concerning members' evaluations of the chamber, its rules, the resources it provides to members, and their ability to enact their agenda.

These responses allow the number of terms served by lawmakers to be modeled as a function of attitudes, officeholder characteristics, and personal circumstances. While

the desire to serve the public is negatively associated with the number of terms served, no statistically significant relationship is found between the length of time in office and respondent's wish to advance their careers both personally and professionally. Legislators will serve longer when their approach to officeholding includes the decision to value their own conscience and judgement, are satisfied with the rules and operation of the house, have sufficient resources to accomplish their agenda, and are able to pass legislation they find important. Legislators' careers are constrained by personal and family obligations and their desires to serve the public good. The public, and even legislators themselves, may harbor ill will toward the legislature but many indicate their own reasons for serving are good.

These results conform to the literature's expectation that candidates and officeholders are driven by costs and benefits – deciding to enter or remain in office when the benefit of service outweigh the costs of running and potentially losing. The variation in attitudes also confirms the belief that lawmakers are not monoliths, but motivated by different incentives and dissimilar goals. This study also illustrates the importance of perceptions when evaluating institutions. Though a state may not provide the salary and staff that other states handout to their members, this does not imply that lawmakers will be upset with what their given. Moving forward it is important to develop attitudinal measures that better assess preferences toward government service and the institutions in which they serve, providing more insight into the career decisions and motivations of officeholders.

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