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Wealth and Policymaking in the U.S. House of Representatives

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ABSTRACT

Do members of Congress with relatively more and less wealth approach policymaking differently, or succeed at different rates? This paper examines data on the personal wealth and legislative effectiveness of representatives between 1979 and 2021 to assess how wealth shapes legislative outcomes. The analysis finds that legislators in the top wealth quintile are significantly more successful at advancing their policy agendas than their less-wealthy colleagues, while those in the bottom quintile face persistent disadvantages in the legislative process. These gaps emerge over time and are moderated by institutional factors rather than differences in prior legislative experience or preexisting legislative ability. The findings suggest that economic inequality among legislators translates into unequal policymaking influence in Congress.

At the beginning of the 98th Congress in 1983, the House of Representatives welcomed a trio of fresh faces from West Virginia—Representatives Alan Mollohan, Harley Staggers Jr., and Robert Wise Jr. With their shared party affiliation, race, gender, and professional backgrounds as lawyers, they seemed destined to navigate the legislative process together. They even voted the same on almost every bill.

However, as the years unfolded, the paths of their legislative agendas diverged dramatically. After more than four years in office, only one of these representatives had succeeded in turning their legislative priorities into law. What accounts for this difference in legislative effectiveness? Surprisingly, a critical factor has been overlooked in the literature on legislative policymaking: their personal wealth.

Reps. Mollohan and Staggers were alike in many respects, both succeeding their fathers in open House seats. Yet, their financial disclosures revealed stark differences. Rep. Mollohan, belonging to the top wealth quintile of House members, possessed substantial wealth, while Rep. Staggers found himself among the least wealthy representatives in the bottom quintile. Rep. Staggers held assets that amounted to more than $100,000 (nominal dollars), making him wealthier than most individuals back home in his district, but he was less wealthy than most of his peers in Congress. Rep. Wise was the least wealthy member of the trio, and perhaps all of Congress, given his financial disclosure of $5000 (nominal dollars). This contrast in wealth prompts an intriguing question—did it influence their legislative effectiveness?

In their early years in Congress, Reps. Staggers and Wise struggled to advance their legislative agendas in Congress; of the dozens of bills that they introduced, not a single bill was reported out of committee during their first two terms in office. For Rep. Mollohan, however, advancing a legislative agenda appeared

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to be routine. Not only did one of his bills become a law in his first term, but a quarter of all legislation that he introduced in the 98th Congress passed through a committee.[1] In the 99th Congress, Rep. Mollohan acquired a seat on the Appropriations committee, one of the most desirable committee assignments, and he continued to further his legislative priorities. Meanwhile, Reps. Staggers and Wise continued to see their bills die in committee for nearly half a decade.

Were the experiences of these three members unique or were they representative of larger trends about wealth and lawmaking power? This paper explores this question and reports the relationship between representatives' relative personal wealth and their success in the policymaking process. It aims to uncover whether wealthy lawmakers experience different levels of effectiveness in navigating Congress compared to their less-wealthy peers, and if so, why.

Because most members of Congress are comparatively wealthier than the general public, many scholars overlook the possibility that wealth disparities among lawmakers hold relevance to their legislative behavior. This paper moves beyond the common assumption of lawmaker affluence, and it underscores that wealth is relative and dependent upon one's own circumstances and peer group.[2] Even if they do not apply to most other individuals, the differences that distinguish millionaires from billionaires, or the wealthy from the less-wealthy in Congress, are potentially quite meaningful. Representatives whose only assets are their district homes and a savings account with less than $100,000 may be wealthier than most of their constituents, but they are far less wealthy than most other members and likely have different experiences than representatives with multiple homes and millions of dollars in assets. In Congress, personal wealth may be related to how representatives conduct themselves while they try to accomplish their policy goals—and how other representatives engage with them as they pursue their goals.

Drawing on 40 years of data about representatives' personal wealth, I assess how wealth affects legislative effectiveness. This study explores three key pathways through which wealth may shape lawmaking success: (1) by influencing legislative priorities and the time lawmakers dedicate to policymaking, (2) through differences in personal skills and backgrounds that may correlate with wealth, and (3) via institutional positioning, as wealthier members may be more likely to secure powerful roles that amplify their legislative influence. The analyses reveal intriguing trends; during the Congresses included in the study, the wealthiest 20% of representatives were more effective at advancing their policy agenda through Congress than the remaining 80%.

But what factors contribute to this wealth-based inequality? The analyses explore wealthy representatives' efforts and successes throughout various stages of the legislative process and in a variety of institutional settings. The results indicate that the increased effectiveness of wealthy legislators is not necessarily the result of them introducing more bills than their peers, but rather, it is due largely to their bills advancing further through early stages of the lawmaking process, particularly the committee stage. Additionally, the data suggest that wealthy lawmakers do not usually begin their congressional careers with more legislative experience or a greater capacity to push their legislative agenda compared to their less-wealthy peers. Instead, their increased effectiveness emerges over time and is strongly related to their involvement with key institutional roles, specifically within powerful committees and when they are part of the majority party.

In contrast, the least-wealthy 20% of representatives struggle to achieve similar levels of legislative effectiveness as their wealthier peers in most Congresses examined. My analysis shows that this discrepancy is not due to a lack of lawmaking experience or fewer legislative proposals. Instead, their bills are disproportionately halted at various stages of the lawmaking process.

Overall, this study provides insight into the enduring influence of economic class in government. By tracing how representatives from different economic backgrounds navigate Congress, this research highlights stark political inequality in the legislative process and calls attention to the broader implications of economic inequality within government.

1 | What Is Known About Wealth and Lawmaking?

In the U.S. Congress, the role of personal wealth in lawmaking remains underexplored. While conventional wisdom assumes that wealthier elites dominate policymaking, this notion is often based more on suspicion than evidence. Nonetheless, The Framers of the Constitution designed political institutions that reinforced the influence of the wealthy in governance based on the belief that the wealthy should have a permanent share of government power (Klarman 2016; United States Constitutional Convention et al. 1839). This historical legacy invites questions about whether these dynamics persist today.

Political scientists have made significant strides in studying the economic backgrounds of legislators (Carnes and Lupu 2023), but the extent to which wealth disparities shape lawmaking power remains unclear. The challenge stems from a lack of reliable financial data and measurement difficulties (discussed in a subsequent section) which have constrained the scope of existing research. In its absence, scholars like Gilens (2012, 235) assume that all members are affluent due to their salaries. Indeed, most members of Congress were paid between $60,622.50 and $174,000 (nominal dollars) between 1980 and 2023 (Brudnick 2023), and the current minimum salary of $174,000 is more than two and a half times the median household income nationally ($71,186) (U.S. Census Bureau). However, this assumption oversimplifies reality, overlooking significant wealth disparities between members and their implications for policymaking.

Existing studies on legislators' wealth tend to focus on its growth and its influence on roll-call voting, with mixed findings. Some research suggests that members vote in their own material self-interest for issues like the reduction and repeal of the estate tax (Griffin and Anewalt-Remsburg 2013), raising the federal debt limit (Grose 2013), and policies that would benefit firms connected to their personal investments (Peterson and Grose 2021). Across most policy domains, however, wealth's influence on voting appears minimal (Welch and Peters 1983) or even null (Chappell 1981; Carnes 2013). Gilens (2012, 238) summarizes the prevailing consensus: "… legislators' personal interests and preferences can shape their congressional voting, but … concern over the growing wealth of members of Congress is probably misplaced". Still, this perspective leaves broader legislative activities—bill sponsorship, committee influence, and lawmaking effectiveness—largely unexamined.

Wealth disparities among lawmakers also shape their lived experiences in office, potentially impacting their legislative effectiveness. Some lawmakers struggle to find or maintain housing in Washington D.C. when first elected (Hirschkorn and Andrews 2011; Schultz 2018; Diaz 2022), and Congress has consistently voted against salary increases despite rising living costs. As Rep. Tim Ryan's (D-OH) noted during a funding debate:

> We have Members sleeping in their offices to save money. So, we need to have a real discussion on this issue … or this body will be filled with only millionaires who do not represent the vast majority of the American people (Marcos 2020).

This debate about lawmaker pay reflects historical class divisions in Congress (Alston et al. 2006), and it is a debate that Rep. Ryan's economic class (the bottom 20% of wealth-holders in the House) usually loses.

2 | A Rich History

Such class-based tensions in Congress reflect historical trends. Since the nation's founding, economic elites have dominated policymaking. Scholars argue that the Framers' own financial interests shaped the Constitution's design (Beard 1935; McGuire 2003; but see McDonald 1992), and early American policymaking in Congress and throughout the government was led by the wealthiest citizens (McGuire 2003, 53).[3] The Framers also sought to protect property rights and maintain elite control, supporting voting restrictions based on wealth (Williamson 1960) and officeholding requirements (Klarman 2016, 180–181). As a result, wealth determined access to policymaking power early in American history, and the resulting policies reflected the economic interests of the upper class.

Does the modern-day legislative process reflect an economic class bias? While political participation has expanded, Congress remains a millionaire's club (Carnes 2016; Carnes and Lupu 2016). While this observation raises questions about the persistence of class-based bias in the legislative process, it also informs expectations regarding the policymaking influence of wealthier members. Drawing parallels to their wealthy forebears, it is plausible that these wealthier representatives wield considerable power in shaping policy today.

Furthermore, wealth disparities may interact with other forms of underrepresentation. Women, African-Americans, and individuals from low economic classes were excluded from early congressional representation and continue to face institutional barriers. Research suggests that working-class legislators work harder to gain cosponsors on economic policy bills but see no greater success in advancing them compared to their colleagues (Carnes 2013). Female representatives, particularly those in the majority party, introduce more legislation than their male colleagues but achieve similar levels of effectiveness (Volden et al. 2013). Black Democrats in Congress and state legislatures also encounter greater difficulties in advancing their legislative priorities compared to white co-partisans (Bratton and Haynie 1999; Volden and Wiseman 2014).

If economic class is indicative of underrepresentation, like race and gender, then representatives with less wealth may experience distinct barriers in the legislative process, contributing to disparities in effectiveness. If significant differences emerge in lawmaking success between wealthier and less-wealthy members, this would suggest that economic status influences legislative strategies, institutional positioning, and overall policymaking power.

3 | Exploring the Link Between Personal Wealth and Lawmaking Effectiveness

While the personal wealth of members is an understudied topic, this paper explores how wealth might influence legislative effectiveness through three key pathways: (a) legislative priorities (direct effect), (b) personal skills and abilities (confounding), and (c) institutional positions shaped by class-based biases (mediation). Figure 1 provides a directed acyclic graph (DAG) visualizing how each pathway represents a distinct way that personal wealth could advantage or disadvantage legislators, highlighting the complex relationship between wealth and legislative outcomes.

Starting with **legislative priorities**, personal wealth may directly influence how much legislators prioritize lawmaking over other responsibilities like fundraising or constituent services. Legislators face significant time constraints (Congressional Management Foundation and Human Resource Management 2013), and their personal policy interests contribute to their participation in the earliest stages of the lawmaking process (Fenno 1973; Hall 1996). Wealthier members might allocate more time to legislative activities due to fewer financial pressures, while less-wealthy legislators, burdened by fundraising demands, may have limited bandwidth for lawmaking. This dynamic suggests that legislators from lower economic classes introduce fewer bills than their wealthier peers, who face fewer economic constraints or can self-finance campaigns.

Skills and abilities, on the other hand, introduce a confounding dimension to the relationship between wealth and legislative effectiveness. Wealthier legislators may have advantages shaped by education, professional experiences, or prior political involvement that enhance their lawmaking effectiveness. Prior state legislative experience, for instance, correlates with legislative success (Bucchianeri et al. 2020), as does the ability to build bipartisan coalitions (Volden et al. 2018; Harbridge-Yong et al. 2023). If this selection bias story holds,

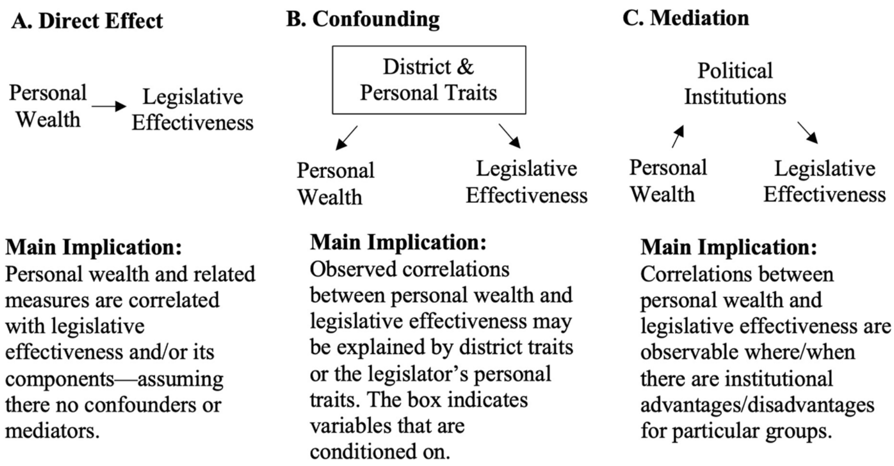

FIGURE 1 | Wealth and legislative effectiveness potential pathways.

then wealthier legislators' effectiveness may stem from pre-existing skills rather than financial status. This perspective also suggests that disparities in legislative effectiveness would emerge early in lawmakers' careers, shaped by differences in prior abilities.

Finally, legislators from different economic classes may experience advantages or disadvantages stemming from inherited institutional arrangements. While Congress has grown more descriptively representative over time, legislators continue to resemble their historical counterparts—wealthy lawyers, politicians, business owners, and white-collar professionals (McGuire 2003, 55; Carnes 2013, 20). This continuity highlights the enduring influence of economic elites in the legislative process.

Institutional arrangements may mediate the relationship between wealth and legislative effectiveness by reflecting persistent inequalities in access to power. Wealthier lawmakers often hold key committee assignments and leadership roles that amplify their policymaking influence. These patterns are not new; in early Congresses, committee assignments heavily concentrated power among a few legislators (Senate.gov n.d.). By the Ninth Congress (1805–1806), eight senators controlled over 70% of committee assignments, including key chair positions, underscoring how institutional practices historically centralized decision-making power among elites. Contemporary arrangements, such as majority party control (Volden and Wiseman 2014) and the committee system (Berry and Fowler 2018), continue to favor lawmakers holding these influential positions, disproportionately benefiting wealthier members.

Scholars have highlighted how these institutional arrangements can act as bottlenecks, disadvantaging lawmakers from historically underrepresented groups. For instance, proposals from women and African American Democrats often face less favorable treatment in committees compared to those of their male or white peers (Volden et al. 2013; Volden and Wiseman 2014, 105). While differences in the size or scope of legislative agendas may play a role, research consistently shows that proposals advancing past committee stages perform well, with historically underrepresented lawmakers' bills proving particularly successful in minority party contexts. These findings reinforce the idea that institutional structures designed by economic elites advantage wealthier legislators while constraining others.

The extent to which these institutional features affect legislators across economic classes remains underexplored. If institutional advantages are as significant as suggested, one would expect no inherent differences in lawmaking effectiveness outside of these contexts. Instead, wealthier legislators would excel primarily when holding roles that amplify policymaking influence.

4 | Data and Measurement

For the analysis, I draw on data on the personal finances of representatives between 1979 and 2021. Members of Congress are required to submit a financial disclosure report annually, in accordance with the Ethics in Government Act of 1978, to the clerks of the House or Senate. In their financial disclosure reports, members report (1) assets: the sources and amounts of income, gifts, and reimbursements, and the identity and approximate value of property held; (2) liabilities owed; (3) all transactions in property, commodities, and securities; and (4) certain financial interests of a spouse or dependent child(ren).[4]

For assets, members must report stocks and bond holdings above $1000, savings accounts that are at least $5000, and any income-generating real estate holdings. Members are also required to report any asset that generated at least $200 in income. Members are not required to report the value of homes that they use themselves, their annual salary as members, or the value of their federal retirement accounts.

For liabilities, members must report any debt that is at least $10,000, but they are not required to disclose their home mortgages, loans on cars or household goods, or loans that they owe to relatives. Members are also required to report whether they hold a "qualified blind trust."

These data were collected by Eggers and Klašnja (2018), who collected the financial disclosure reports of members of the U.S. House for even-numbered years between 1979 and 2002.[5] These data are combined with data on the financial disclosures of members between 2004 and 2021 to create a dataset of congressional assets and liabilities spanning 40 years.[6] Since members generally report the value of their financial holdings in ranges (e.g., $1001–$5000), Eggers and Klašnja (2018) calculate the sum of the mid-points of the value range for each item that is reported to estimate the total value of each member's assets and liabilities. For the highest value category—which has no upper bound—they impute the lower bound. This coding rule may underestimate very large assets or liabilities,[7] but it provides a consistent approach to handling top-coded observations.[8]

One caveat with using reported assets as a measure of wealth is that such a measure may overestimate the wealth of members who have outstanding debts. However, the results of the analyses reported herein are substantively unchanged if a different measure of wealth (such as net worth, the difference between members' assets and liabilities) is used.

Drawing on these data, I construct wealth indicators that identify representatives in the bottom or top 20% of wealth-holders in the House for each Congress. I calculate the wealth of each representative in each Congress by focusing on the estimated sum of mean values of House members' (reported) assets as a coarse measure of their wealth for each year in the dataset. I use wealth quintiles for categorizing members of Congress due to the inherent imprecision of the asset data, which are often reported in ranges. This method not only aids in addressing the measurement challenges of identifying precise wealth levels but also provides a stable classification of relative wealth.

In the analyses, I focus specifically on contrasting members at the extremes of the wealth distribution with everyone else in between. By including a dummy variable for the top wealth quintile, another for the bottom quintile, and treating the three middle quintiles as the baseline category, I highlight whether the wealthiest and least wealthy representatives behave differently than their more moderately wealthy peers. This choice is not arbitrary, but rather guided by the theoretical framework that animates this study. As Winters and Page (2009) suggest, analyzing "oligarchic tendencies" requires special attention to the minority at the very top of the wealth distribution, as well as those at the opposite end of it. By collapsing the middle three quintiles, my analysis zeroes in on these "haves" and "have-nots," enabling a clear test of whether extreme wealth positions correlate with distinctive patterns of legislative behavior.

Using this dichotomous approach also has practical advantages. Splitting the sample into all five quintiles and using, say, the middle quintile as a reference category would introduce more parameters and potentially reduce statistical power. While differences among the three middle quintiles may exist, I expect them to be less pronounced than those at the extremes. Merging the middle quintiles thus preserves statistical precision and interpretability and concentrates the analysis on the theoretically relevant comparisons. The result is a sharper focus on whether exceptionally wealthy representatives exhibit distinct legislative patterns compared to both the broad center of the distribution and their least affluent colleagues—patterns consistent with oligarchic dynamics, where a wealthy minority exercises disproportionate influence over policy.[9]

Some readers may wish to see whether there is an "inflection point" at which wealth's influence emerges–perhaps between the fourth and fifth quintiles, or even more gradually. To address this concern, I provide supplemental analyses that break out each of the five quintiles separately or present predicted outcomes by quintile (Table A8).

Additionally, representatives' legislative effectiveness is measured using Volden and Wiseman's (2014) Legislative Effectiveness Score (LES), which captures a member's ability to advance bills through the legislative process. The LES is a comprehensive measure, accounting for multiple stages of the lawmaking process, and giving greater weight to members who succeed at advancing legislation through later stages.[10] Volden and Wiseman's coding protocol also categorizes each bill by importance, with its contribution to a member's LES weighted accordingly.[11]

Collectively, this methodological approach serves both the theoretical goal of identifying potential oligarchic patterns and the empirical goal of producing stable, interpretable estimates of wealth's impact on legislative effectiveness.

5 | Personal Wealth, Backgrounds, and Legislative Effectiveness

Are wealthy representatives more effective in advancing their legislation through Congress than their less-wealthy peers? Do the most-wealthy and the least-wealthy representatives (i.e., the bottom and top quintile of wealth-holders) have distinct backgrounds and experiences from each other and the chamber as a whole? The analysis begins with the second question to get a sense of how similar and different the least-wealthy and the most-wealthy representatives are from each other.

When assessing the economic backgrounds and legislative effectiveness of House members, wealth appears to intersect with several factors that could influence a representative's effectiveness (as noted by Volden and Wiseman 2014, 2018). Figures 2 and 3 allow for some understanding of how the least- and most-wealthy representatives differ in their personal and professional backgrounds, not only from each other but also in relation to the broader composition of the House.

The first graph in Figure 2 illustrates the wide economic divide among House members serving between 1979 and 2021, with the top 20% of members—represented by light gray bars—possessing median assets more than $9 million (adjusted to 2023 USD). This contrasts sharply with the median asset value of the middle 60% (gray bars), which exceeds $1 million and is a far cry from the median of $130,000 held by the bottom 20% of members. This plot highlights the pronounced wealth concentration within the most affluent group in the House, emphasizing the vast financial chasm that separates legislators across the wealth distribution.

Figure 2 also offers a window into other disparities between the wealthiest and least-wealthy representatives in Congress. The wealthiest representatives are significantly older in age, being roughly 5% older on average compared to other members and

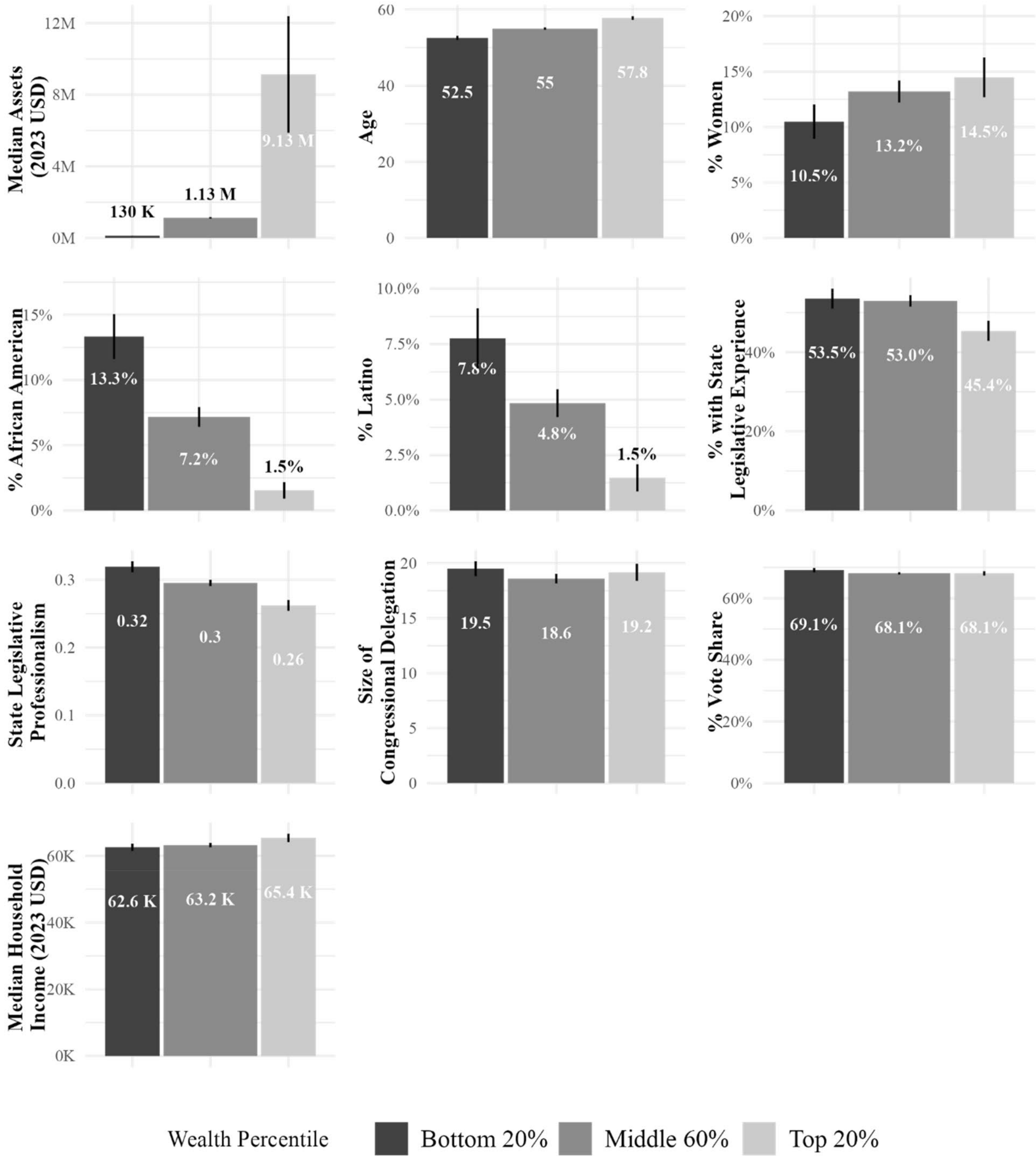

FIGURE 2 | Incumbent wealth and background in the house (96th–116th). This figure, as well as Figure 3, presents the mean values (or percentages) and 95% confidence intervals for various incumbent and district characteristics associated with lawmaking, categorized by wealth percentiles. Median values for wealth percentiles are shown for lawmaker assets and household income. The means shown for State Legislative Professionalism include only those members with previous experience as a state legislators. Table A1 provides variable descriptions.

10% older compared to the least-wealthy representatives. While there is no significant difference in seniority between representatives (shown in Figure 3), wealthier representatives may tend to possess an experiential advantage that, as Miquel and Snyder (2006) posit, could translate into legislative effectiveness through a process of "learning by doing."

There are other notable demographic disparities across wealth levels among members of Congress, which may relate to their legislative effectiveness. Women comprise nearly 11% of the least-wealthy lawmakers but almost 15% of the most-wealthy lawmakers (and 13% of all others), suggesting that wealthier female lawmakers may have overcome substantial barriers to achieve both financial and political success. This pattern aligns with the argument made by Anzia and Berry (2011), who posit that women often overcome substantial barriers to enter Congress and are often more effective legislators than their peers despite institutional disadvantages. For example, women in majority parties introduce more legislation than their peers—an advantage that is nullified within the committee system; in

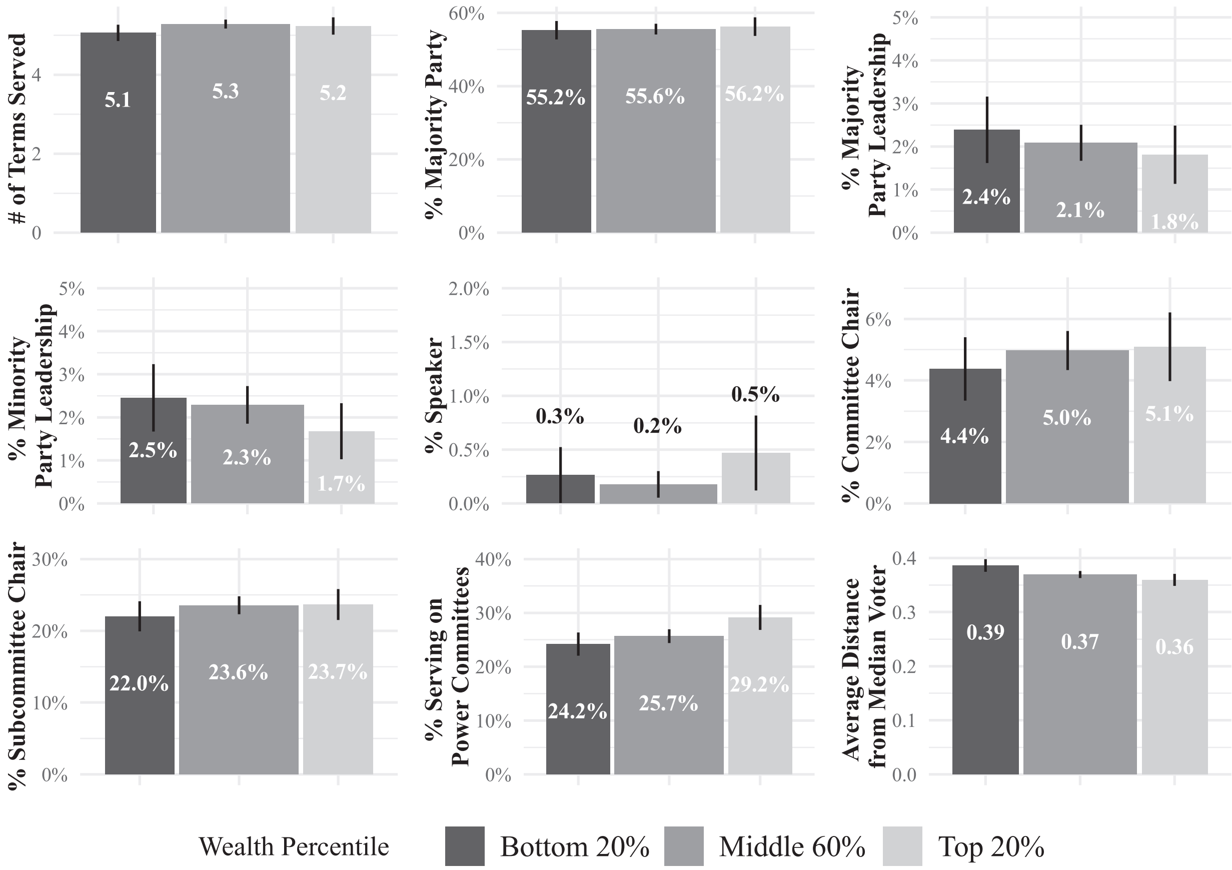

FIGURE 3 | Incumbent wealth and institutional position in the house (96th–116th).

contrast, the enhanced effectiveness of women in minority parties is linked to their ability to foster compromises with majority-party colleagues (Volden et al. 2013, 336). The observed wealth disparity by gender may therefore reflect a "compensating differential", where women who are elected to Congress bring exceptional qualities that enhance both their legislative effectiveness and financial status.

Similarly, racial and ethnic composition shows significant disparities across wealth levels, which may also have implications for legislative effectiveness. African Americans account for nearly 14% and Latinos for almost 8% of lawmakers in the bottom wealth quintile, yet their representation drops dramatically to around 1% in the top wealth quintile. African Americans, in particular, face notable resistance in the legislative process, especially when serving within majority parties and at the committee stage (Volden and Wiseman 2014, 120). These demographic disparities suggest that the least wealthiest representatives, who often bring a diverse range of perspectives to the legislative process, may encounter significant institutional barriers that limit their ability to effectively advance proposals.

When it comes to state legislative experience, a clear majority of the least-wealthy representatives (53%) served in state legislatures, while fewer of the most-wealthy representatives (nearly 46%) have a similar professional background. More effective state lawmakers are also more likely to be elected to Congress (Thomsen et al. 2022), which suggests that prior legislative experience may be a boon for navigating the legislative process. However, differences in legislative effectiveness between wealthy and less-wealthy representatives may reflect disparities in the type and duration of their state legislative experience. Less-wealthy lawmakers, for example, are more likely to have served in professionalized state legislatures, which provide greater opportunities to develop policy expertise and legislative skills. In contrast, wealthier legislators tend to spend less time in professionalized chambers, which, as Bucchianeri et al. (2020) suggest, may limit their preparedness for federal legislative roles.

The last graph in Figure 2 highlights both similarities and subtle differences in the median household income of districts represented by members across wealth percentiles. Districts represented by the top 20% of wealthiest lawmakers have a median household income of $65,400–significantly exceeding that of districts represented by the middle 60% ($63,200) and the bottom 20% ($62,600). This indicates that wealthier representatives are more likely to serve districts with modestly higher economic resources. Given that policy change is often more closely aligned with the preferences of affluent constituencies (Gilens and Page 2014; Bartels 2016), this economic advantage may provide lawmakers from wealthier districts with greater leverage in the legislative process.

Moving to Figure 3, ideological extremity shows a small but notable significant difference; wealthier representatives are marginally closer to the chamber median, while less-wealthy representatives are positioned slightly further away. This pattern could reflect on the legislative strategies and coalition-building capacities of representatives from different economic backgrounds. Wealthier representatives, for example, may be better able to facilitate broad coalition formation to secure key institutional positions and/or advance their legislative agendas. Less-wealthy legislators, on the other hand, may face challenges doing the same given their relatively extreme ideological positions.

Majority and minority party leadership positions in Congress do not exhibit a pronounced economic class bias, consistent with research examining state legislatures showing equitable representation in leadership for underrepresented groups (Hansen and Clark 2020). This observation indicates that leadership positions, at least at the party level, are neither exclusively nor predominantly occupied by wealthier members, offering a degree of economic diversity within the top echelons of congressional leadership.

At first glance, the distribution of key institutional positions such as committee chairs and subcommittee chairs suggests differences among wealth percentiles, with wealthier lawmakers appearing to occupy these roles at a slightly higher rate. However, the differences are not statistically significant, indicating that there may not be meaningful disparities in access—potentially due to the influence of seniority rules that govern these appointments.

In contrast, membership on powerful committees—such as Rules, Appropriations, or Ways and Means—reveals a clearer pattern. The wealthiest 20% of lawmakers occupy these crucial roles at a higher rate, with a notable difference of 3%–5% points when compared to their less wealthy colleagues. While these positions are pivotal in dictating the legislative agenda and controlling the flow of legislation, membership does not necessarily translate into greater individual legislative effectiveness. Rank-and-file members of these committees often focus on other related responsibilities that limit their ability to sponsor and advance their own bills (Volden and Wiseman 2014). Nevertheless, the disparity in access to these influential roles underscores the potential for wealth to shape the broader legislative agenda and steer the direction of policymaking.

In sum, the similarities in seniority and access to party leadership positions suggest a degree of parity across wealth percentiles in terms of congressional experience and institutional opportunity. However, significant differences in age, gender representation, racial and ethnic diversity, prior state legislative experience, ideological alignment, committee assignments, and the modestly higher household income in districts represented by wealthier lawmakers highlight the many ways wealth may influence legislative effectiveness. Conversely, less-wealthy members, who tend to be younger and bring greater racial and ethnic diversity as well as professionalized state legislative experience, may face institutional barriers that limit their influence despite their policy expertise. These disparities highlight the multifaceted role of wealth in influencing legislative effectiveness, policymaking, and the career trajectories of members of Congress.

To assess the factors that may drive differences in legislative effectiveness between wealthy and less wealthy lawmakers, I conduct a series of ordinary least squares regressions to test the mechanisms outlined in Figure 1. While no single mechanism is expected to fully account for the observed patterns, data that align uniquely with one pathway provide strong evidence for that mechanism's relevance. When the data support multiple explanations, I refine the analysis by identifying additional implications to differentiate among them.

As previously outlined, the direct effect hypothesis suggests that wealthier legislators outperform their less-wealthy peers because wealth directly enhances their ability to engage in legislative activities, independent of other factors. From this perspective, wealth reduces external pressures, such as fundraising demands, allowing lawmakers to allocate more time and resources to advancing their legislative agendas. In contrast, the confounding hypothesis posits that wealth is not the driver of legislative effectiveness per se, but instead correlates with traits such as prior experience or district characteristics which independently enhance one's wealth and legislative effectiveness.

Figure 4 summarizes the results of regression models comparing overall differences in legislative effectiveness among lawmakers of varying wealth levels. In the unadjusted model, which examines the direct relationships without control variables, legislators in the bottom 20% exhibit a statistically significant disadvantage, with effectiveness reduced by approximately 10% relative to their peers ($p < 0.05$). The coefficient for the top 20% is positive, yet not statistically significant, suggesting no clear advantage for the wealthiest legislators before accounting for additional factors.

In the adjusted model—which controls for individual, district, and institutional characteristics of members—the coefficient for the bottom 20% wealth group remains negative and statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), but its magnitude decreases to almost 8%. The wealthiest group's coefficient approaches statistical significance ($p < 0.10$), indicating that wealthier lawmakers may enjoy a modest (approximately 7%) advantage in legislative effectiveness after controlling for confounding variables. These results suggest that while the disadvantages experienced by the least-wealthy representatives persist even after accounting for other factors, the potential benefits of wealth for the top 20% are less straightforward. Instead of wealth directly driving their legislative effectiveness, these advantages are confounded by other variables and potentially mediated by institutional contexts.

For context, the difference in the legislative effectiveness between the most- and least-wealthy representatives according to the adjusted model is more than 14% points. This gap is smaller than the differences between minority-party members and majority-party members, or between committee chairs and rank-and-file members, who are about two to five times more effective, respectively, than the average minority party member of Congress (Volden and Wiseman 2014, 43–44). However, this difference is larger than the difference in legislative effectiveness between the average representative in her first term and the average representative in her third term. Likewise, the difference in LES between the most- and least-wealthy members is more than the 10% difference in LES between the average female and male representatives; and the difference approaches the 22% difference in legislative effectiveness between white and African American legislators (ibid, 43). These comparisons highlight that wealth, while not the most important

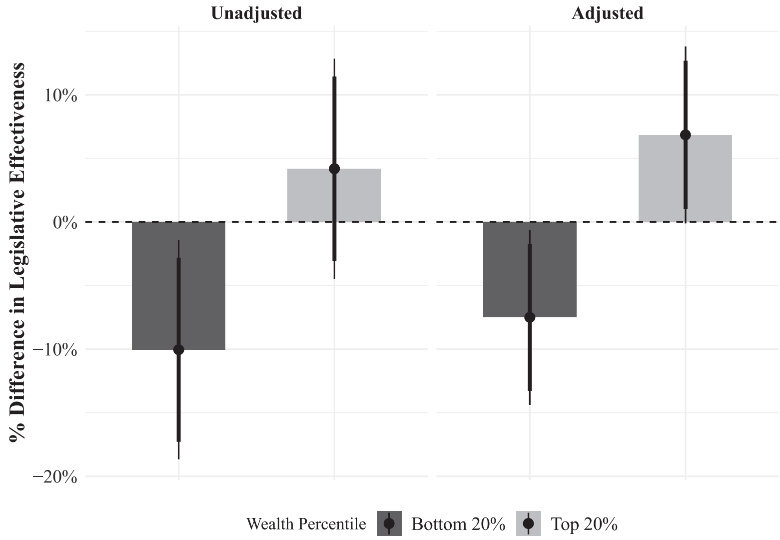

FIGURE 4 | Wealth and legislative effectiveness. This figure shows the results from ordinary least squares regression models focusing on the Legislative Effectiveness Score (LES) of representatives serving in the House between 1979 and 2021. Dark gray bars represent coefficients for the bottom 20% wealth quintile compared to all other members, and the light gray bars represent the top 20% wealth quintile. The thick error bars represent 90% confidence intervals, while the thin error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The unadjusted model (left panel) reflects raw relationships, while the adjusted model (right panel) accounts for legislator, district, and institutional characteristics (Appendix Table A3).

factor, plays a meaningful role in shaping legislative effectiveness, particularly in disadvantaging the least-wealthy legislators.

6 | Wealth-Based Disparities in Bill Progression

These findings prompt further exploration into the mechanisms by which wealth influences legislative success, raising the question of whether institutional arrangements mediate this relationship. Are wealthier representatives introducing more legislation than their counterparts from other economic strata? Are they more successful at advancing their bills through critical stages of the legislative process, while their peers' proposals face greater obstacles? Do they, or their co-partisans, disproportionately benefit from influential positions within the U.S. House that amplify their effectiveness? This section addresses these questions by analyzing the comparative effort and success of wealthy and less-wealthy lawmakers at various stages of the lawmaking process.

In Figure 5, I present the results of a series of ordinary least squares regressions where the dependent variables in each of the models are the number of bills that a representative has in each of the five stages of the lawmaking process that serve as components of Volden and Wiseman's LES: the number of bills that a representative introduces, the number of those bills that receive any sort of action in committee, the number of her bills that receive any kind of action beyond committee, the number of her bills that pass the House, and the number of her bills that become law. Similar to the models from earlier, the key independent variables are the indicators for whether a representative is in the top or bottom wealth quintile.[12]

The coefficient estimates from the first model represented in Figure 5 are imprecisely estimated and suggest that the most-wealthy representatives do not necessarily introduce more legislation than their peers.[13] The coefficient for Top 20% in the Bills Introduced section of the graph is positive, yet it is statistically insignificant.[14] Similarly, while the most-wealthy representatives do appear to have more of their bills receive action in committee and advance beyond committee, these estimates are not statistically significant. However, taken together, these patterns suggest that any advantage that wealthier lawmakers may have most likely manifests in the early stages of the legislative process, where their bills appear to gain more initial traction than those of their peers.

In contrast, while the least-wealthy representatives do not necessarily introduce less legislation than their wealthier peers, their bills do receive significantly less attention in all of the subsequent stages of the lawmaking process. Bills from the least-wealthy representatives see less action in committee (about a 7% difference; $p<0.10$), have less action beyond committee (roughly a 6% difference; $p<0.10$), pass the House less frequently (almost a 7% difference $p<0.10$), and become law less frequently (roughly a 9% difference; $p<0.05$) compared to their wealthier peers (Appendix, Table A4).

Building on these results, Figure 6 illustrates how wealth-based disparities in legislative effectiveness differ depending on whether the representatives belong to majority or minority parties. The results show that wealthier lawmakers in majority parties appear 10% more effective compared to their less-wealthy peers ($p<0.05$).[15] This suggests that the advantages associated with wealth are more pronounced in majority party contexts, where institutional positions may amplify the influence of wealthier legislators. In contrast, representatives in the bottom 20% of wealth holders face a disadvantage in majority parties, with negative coefficient estimates suggesting they are 10% ($p<0.05$) less effective than their peers. This pattern underscores the institutional barriers that less-wealthy lawmakers may face in majority party settings, where access to influential roles, committee assignments, and legislative support networks likely favors their wealthier counterparts.

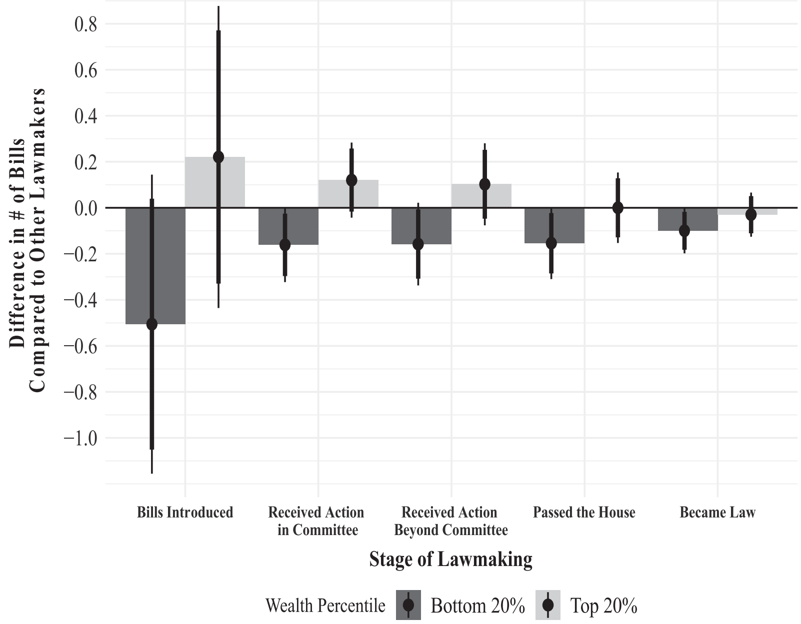

FIGURE 5 | Incumbent wealth and bill progression. This figure presents the results from multiple ordinary least squares regression models where the dependent variables are the number of bills that progress through the five stages of the lawmaking process in Congresses between 1979 and 2021. Each model includes only members whose bills have advanced through the previous stage, ensuring that the analysis accounts for compositional differences at each step of the legislative process. The dark gray bar indicates the coefficient estimate for representatives in the bottom 20% wealth quintile. The gray bar represents the top 20% wealth quintile. The thin (thick) error bars represent the 95% (90%) confidence intervals, and the estimates are based on regression models (Table A4) controlling for various legislator and district characteristics.

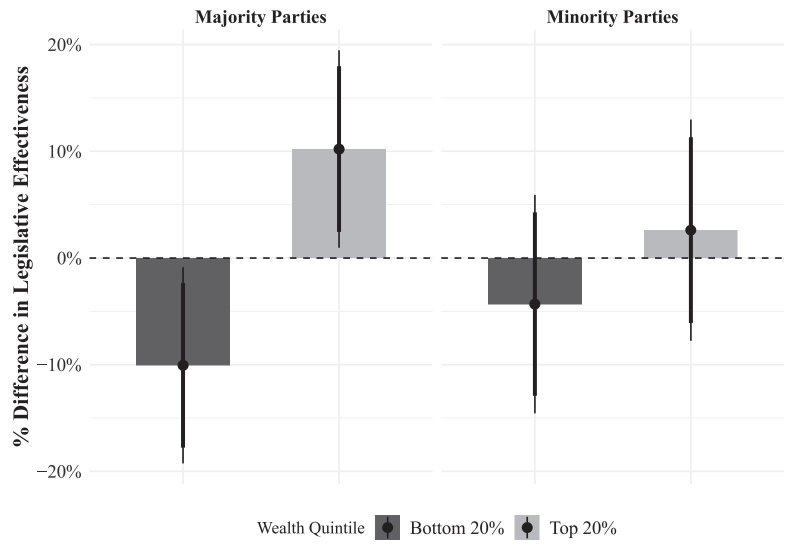

FIGURE 6 | Wealth, party status, and legislative effectiveness. This figure presents the relative effectiveness of the bottom 20% of wealth-holders (dark gray bars) and the top 20% of wealth-holders (light gray bars), controlling for legislator and district characteristics, compared to other House members in majority parties (left panel) and minority parties (right panel) between the 96th and 116th Congresses. The thin (thick) error bars represent the 95% (90%) confidence intervals.

In minority parties, the disparities between wealth groups are much less pronounced. The coefficient estimates for both the top and bottom wealth quintiles are closer to zero and remain statistically insignificant. These findings suggest that the lack of institutional leverage in minority parties reduces the overall impact of wealth on legislative effectiveness, narrowing the gaps observed in majority party contexts. Without the same access to agenda-setting power and leadership positions that characterize majority party status, wealthier legislators in the minority do not appear to enjoy the same advantage that they do when their party controls the chamber.

Some readers might wonder whether the differences in effectiveness across majority and minority parties simply reflect a broader distinction between legislators who are generally more or less effective, regardless of wealth. If effectiveness were primarily driven by legislative skill–such as the ability to build coalitions or negotiate bipartisan support–one might expect it to persist even when lawmakers are in the minority. Indeed, research suggests that members with strong legislative skills, such as freshman legislators who quickly adapt to lawmaking or women legislators who often build bipartisan coalitions, can maintain high levels of effectiveness when their party lacks control of the House. However, the patterns observed in Figure 6 suggest that the relationship between wealth and legislative effectiveness is contingent on institutional context. As we will see, differences in legislative effectiveness between relatively rich and poor members become especially evident when examining how their bills progress through different stages of the lawmaking process.

Figure 7 illustrates these differences in legislative effectiveness by wealth and party status for each stage of the lawmaking process based on regressions reported in the Appendix (Table A5). The left side of the top panel of Figure 7 shows that it is unclear whether the most-wealthy members in the House introduce more bills than other members when serving in the majority party; the coefficient estimate is positive but imprecise and not statistically significant. However, compared to their majority party colleagues, the most-wealthy members in the majority party do see 7% more of their bills receive action in committee ($p < 0.10$). This early-stage advantage, however, fades after their bills are reported out of committee, with no significant differences in bill advancement beyond committee, passage in the House, or enactment into law. Similarly, the wealthiest 20% of members do not experience any discernible advantage in lawmaking over their peers when in the minority party, as their effectiveness remains statistically indistinguishable from other minority party lawmakers.

For comparison, Figure 7 (bottom panel) also shows that the least-wealthy 20% of members see less activity on their bills throughout the legislative process compared to their peers, particularly while serving in the majority party. Although they introduce the same number of bills as their majority party colleagues, their bills are disproportionately filtered out in later stages of the legislative process to roughly the same magnitude described previously. This suggests that the least-wealthy lawmakers struggle to navigate the procedural and institutional hurdles required to advance legislation within a majority party context.

In minority parties, the least-wealthy members propose about 7% fewer bills than other minority party members ($p < 0.10$), but this more selective approach does not improve their success in later stages of the lawmaking process. Still, as Figure 7 shows, proposals from least-wealthy members in the minority party are statistically indistinguishable from other minority party members when advancing through subsequent stages of the legislative process.

7 | Alternative Explanations

Some readers might wonder if systematic differences in access to key institutional positions, such as committee and subcommittee chairs, account for the enhanced legislative effectiveness that we observe for wealthy majority party members. We can see from Figure 3 that the wealthiest representatives had a marginally larger (albeit insignificant) share of appointments as committee and subcommittee chairs than their peers, and nearly three-fourths of the enhanced effectiveness of majority party members is due to committee and subcommittee chairs (Volden

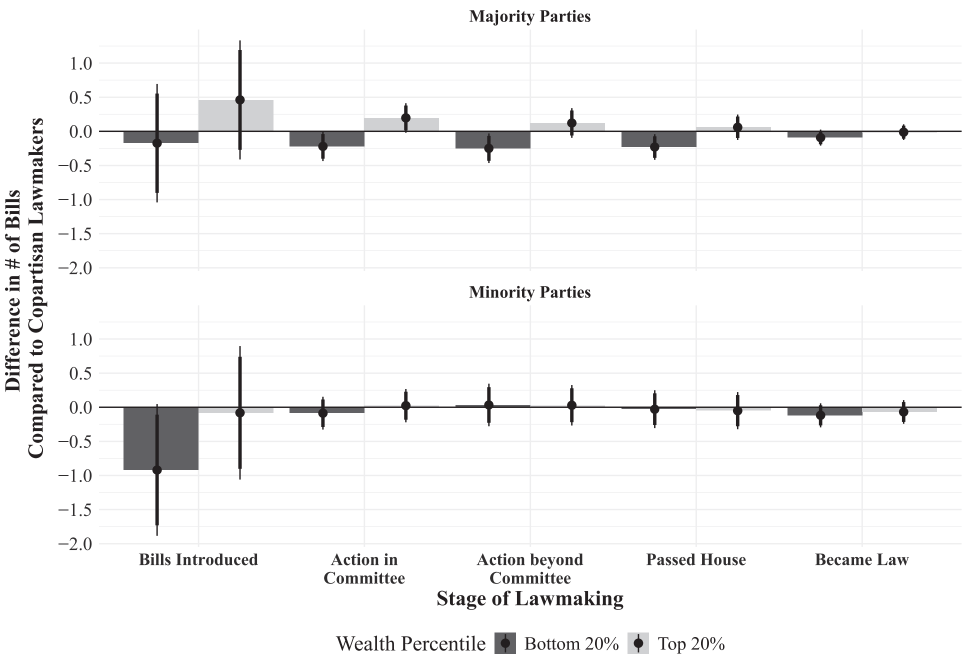

FIGURE 7 | When and where are (most-) least-wealthy members (more or) less effective? This figure shows the difference in the number of bills introduced and advanced through the lawmaking process for the top and bottom 20% of lawmakers, compared to other members, in majority (top panel) and minority parties (bottom panel). Each model includes only members whose bills have advanced through the previous stage, ensuring that the analysis accounts for compositional differences at each step of the legislative process. These models control for legislator and district characteristics, and the thin (thick) error bars represent the 95% (90%) confidence intervals.

and Wiseman 2014, 74). An analysis (reported in the Appendix, Table A6) shows that the wealthiest 20% of members in the majority party are still more effective than their peers in a model that excludes committee and subcommittee chairs. This finding is consistent with the argument that the wealthiest representatives' enhanced lawmaking effectiveness is closely related to a variety of advantages that they may hold while in the majority and not just access to committee and subcommittee chairs.

In contrast, the challenges in lawmaking faced by the least-wealthy members of Congress may be more directly tied to disparities in access to key institutional positions. However, it is important to note that a more equitable distribution of committee chairmanships may not completely eliminate the gap in effectiveness between wealthy and less-wealthy members. This is because wealthier representatives may leverage their institutional positions to greater effect than their colleagues when they obtain them. Additional analyses comparing the effectiveness of wealthy and less-wealthy committee chairs confirm this pattern (Table A6), indicating that even among those with similar leadership positions, wealthier legislators tend to be more effective.

Another question is whether these disparities in legislative effectiveness between wealthy and less-wealthy members are apparent from the beginning of their tenures or develop over time. Figure 8 and Table A7 reports the results of an analysis examining effectiveness at different career stages. The findings indicate that at the start of their tenure, the least-wealthy members are statistically indistinguishable in legislative effectiveness from their wealthiest counterparts and other legislators. However, as members gain seniority, a gap emerges and widens, with wealthier legislators becoming increasingly more effective than their less-wealthy peers.[16] This pattern suggests that disparities in lawmaking effectiveness are not simply the result of preexisting differences in legislative ability, but rather accumulate over time, likely shaped by structural advantages that wealthier lawmakers can leverage as they gain experience. If legislative skill were the primary driver, one would expect differences in effectiveness to be present from the outset of a legislator's career and remain relatively stable regardless of party status (Volden and Wiseman 2014, 30–31). Instead, these findings align with the argument that institutional access and resource advantages compound over time, widening the effectiveness gap between the wealthiest and least-wealthy legislators.

To further explore alternative explanations, I also examine whether wealthier members strategically focus on policy areas with less legislative gridlock, allowing them to pass bills more easily. Appendix B presents an analysis of legislative strategies, indicating that wealthier lawmakers do not systematically prioritize low-conflict policy areas.

Additionally, Appendix C considers whether personal wealth influences the popularity of legislators' bills through campaign transfers. The results suggest that while the least-wealthy members contribute less money to other candidates compared to their wealthier peers, disparities in legislative effectiveness still persist irrespective of campaign transfer activity.

Finally, as a robustness check, I also examine whether differences in educational networks contribute to the effectiveness gap. As reported in Appendix C, legislators who attended elite educational institutions-who are often wealthier-tend to maintain strong professional and social connections that may facilitate legislative success. However, these networks alone do not fully account for the observed disparities, suggesting that wealth-based advantages extend beyond educational pedigree.

8 | Limitations

In addition to the limitations of the imprecise financial disclosure data described in a previous section, a key challenge for this

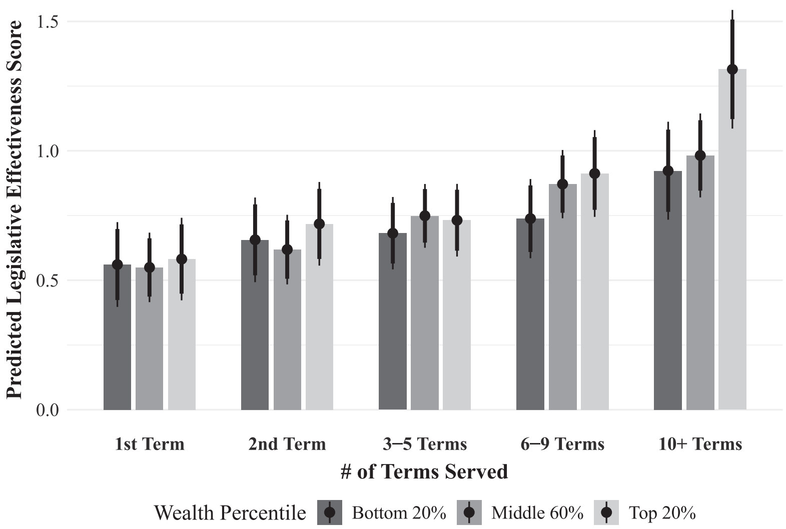

FIGURE 8 | Wealth-based disparities in legislative effectiveness among majority party members develop over the course of legislative careers. This figure presents the predicted legislative effective scores for House members serving in the majority party between 1979 and 2021, categorized by wealth at the start of their congressional careers. The categories include the most-wealthy 20% of legislators (light gray bars), the middle 60% (gray bar), and the bottom 20% (dark gray bar). The model (detailed in Appendix Table A7) assumes a legislator who is average-aged, white, male, non-leadership member, without a committee or subcommittee chair position, not serving on a powerful committee, without prior state legislative experience, and with district-level controls held at their means.

study is distinguishing correlation from causation. While this study controls for a variety of factors including prior experience and institutional positioning, unobserved traits–such as political ambition, access to donor networks, or negotiation skills–may drive both wealth accumulation and legislative effectiveness.[17] If so, wealth may serve as a proxy for preexisting advantages rather than a direct determinant of lawmaking success.

Political institutions mediate the relationship between wealth and effectiveness, but whether wealthier legislators succeed due to financial independence or privileged access to key institutional roles remains uncertain. Future research could explore why wealthier members more frequently occupy powerful committee positions and committee leadership roles—whether due to fundraising advantages, institutional networks, or strategic coalition-building. Proximity to the median voter may also influence leadership selection, as moderates may be favored for key roles. Additionally, if less-wealthy members exit Congress at higher rates due to financial constraints, wealthier legislators may have longer careers, accumulating seniority and influence at higher rates. Exploring these factors would clarify how wealth shapes institutional power.

Co-sponsorship networks may also reinforce legislative disparities, as members tend to collaborate with similar colleagues—a phenomenon known as homophily (e.g., Neal et al. 2022). If wealthier legislators co-sponsor more with influential lawmakers, they may gain network advantages that enhance their effectiveness. This effect could be amplified by preferential committee assignments, giving wealthier first-term members better access to senior chairs. While not directly tested here, the role of co-sponsorship in shaping legislative success across wealth groups warrants further study.

Additionally, the measures of legislative effectiveness and bill progression used in this study may not fully capture all dimensions of lawmaking influence. Some legislators play key roles in shaping policy behind the scenes, which may not translate into higher effectiveness scores. Given the structural barriers less-wealthy lawmakers face in sponsoring bills, future research could incorporate alternative measures of influence.

Finally, these findings may not generalize beyond the U.S. House. The role of wealth in legislative effectiveness could differ in the Senate or state legislatures, requiring comparative analysis across institutional settings in future research.

9 | Discussion

This paper examines the relationship between lawmakers' personal wealth and their legislative effectiveness in Congress. The findings suggest that while personal wealth does not unconditionally predict legislative success, it interacts with political institutions to shape lawmaking outcomes. Representatives in the top wealth quintile are 7%–10% more effective than the average member and 14% more effective than those in the bottom quintile. These differences are not driven by the least-wealthy legislators introducing fewer bills than their peers. Instead, the effectiveness of the wealthiest lawmakers stems from institutional advantages–such as favorable committee treatment of their proposals–while the least-wealthy lawmakers struggle to advance legislation through the legislative process.

The gap in legislative effectiveness between wealthier and less-wealthy lawmakers develops over time, shaped by institutional positions and majority party status. This challenges the assumption that wealthier legislators are inherently more skilled lawmakers. If legislative effectiveness were primarily a function of individual ability, disparities should be evident from the beginning of lawmakers' careers. Instead, the findings suggest that these differences accumulate over time as wealthier members secure positions that enhance their influence.

Moreover, this study raises broader concerns about descriptive representation. People without vast wealth rarely get into Congress, and even when they do, they appear to have less influence in the legislative process than other members. The least-wealthy members, often representing low-income districts, are disproportionately sidelined early in the lawmaking process, despite their significant policymaking experience. These trends suggest that economic inequality in representation extends beyond elections, influencing legislative agendas and outcomes.

The institutional mechanisms behind these disparities warrant further investigation. Future research should explore how party leadership, committees, and interest groups shape the legislative trajectories of members from different economic backgrounds. Understanding whether donors or policy networks play a role in reinforcing these advantages could provide further insight into how wealth interacts with institutional power in Congress. Additionally, examining whether these dynamics extend to the Senate, state legislatures, or other political institutions could help clarify the broader implications of economic disparities in representation.

Ultimately, this study highlights how influence in the legislative process is not evenly distributed among members of Congress. While personal wealth alone does not guarantee effectiveness, institutions consistently favor those with greater economic resources, reinforcing disparities in political power.

Ethics Statement

Data and replication materials will be made available online upon publication. Any views expressed are the author's and do not reflect the official policy or position of the United States Naval Academy, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available online at the LSQ Harvard Database.

Endnotes

[1] This is a remarkable feat considering that only 695 bills (7%) of the 9914 introduced in the 98th Congress were reported out of a committee (GovTrack 2023).

[2] For example, while the members of the 116th Congress were generally wealthier than the median U.S. household, the wealthiest 10% of lawmakers in the same Congress had three times more wealth than the bottom 90% combined (Evers-Hillstrom 2020).

[3] See also McGuire and Ohsfeldt (1986) for a study that applies an "economic interpretation" of the drafting of the Constitution, and see Schuyler (1961) for an overview of the debate surrounding such work.

[4] According to the House Committee on Ethics, members must disclose financial interests of a spouse or dependent child(ren) unless all three of the following conditions are met: (1) the items are solely owned by the spouse or dependent child and the member has no specific knowledge of the items, (2) the items are not in any way—past or present—derived from the member's income or assets, and (3) the member does not derive or expect to derive financial or economic benefit from the assets.

[5] Eggers and Klašnja (2018, 5) note that as much as 15% of financial disclosure reports are missing in the early years of the dataset, and they attribute missing financial disclosure forms to "House archives fail[ing] to include them or ... member[s] fail[ing] to disclose."

[6] Data for 2004–2018 were transcribed and released by the Center for Responsive Politics (available at www.opensecrets.org) while data for 2020 was provided by Beckler et al. (2021; available at https://www.aol.com/news/search-assets-investments-outside-employment-115922571.html).

[7] Reported assets may overestimate wealth for members with significant debts, but this approach retains members in the top 20% with borrowable assets, and results are also consistent when using net worth (assets minus liabilities).

[8] If the true values of assets and liabilities are near the bottom of a value range then those items will be overestimated; but, if the true values of items are near the top of a value range, then those items will be underestimated.

[9] Post hoc analysis (shown in Table A2) suggests that the top quintile is distinct from all others, while the bottom quintile may represent a minimum threshold, differing marginally from the fourth quintile.

[10] Specifically, the LES incorporates information from five stages of the legislative process: (1) how many bills each member introduces, and how many of those bills (2) receive action in committee, (3) pass out of committee and receive action on the House floor, (4) pass the House, and (5) become law.

[11] Volden and Wiseman categorize each bill as being either commemorative, substantive, or substantive and significant. For more details about this coding protocol, see Volden and Wiseman (2014, 20).

[12] I also conduct separate regressions on the total number of bills in each of the substantive categories that are used by Volden and Wiseman in their coding protocol: substantive, substantive and significant, and commemorative bills. The conclusions herein are unchanged by the results of these models.

[13] The lack of a significant disparity in bill introductions echoes the findings shown in Table A3, which presents a model that includes a control that captures the amount of own-sourced campaign loans from members. That model suggests that wealthy members who may have more time to legislate, rather than fundraise given their self-financing, are not more effective than their peers.

[14] This null finding is also supported by an alternative model that uses the logarithm of the number of bill introductions as the dependent variable to address skewness. In this model, the estimates for both wealth groups relative to the baseline are negative and imprecise.

[15] The indicators for party status and wealth used in these models are: Majority-party Bottom 20%, Minority-party Bottom 20%, Majority-party Top 20%, Minority-party Top 20%.

[16] Some readers may find it puzzling that the wealth gap in legislative effectiveness develops over time, given Rep. Mollohan's early success mentioned in the introduction. However, while both Reps. Mollohan and Staggers succeeded their fathers in Congress, Mollohan's substantial wealth may have provided additional advantages, allowing him to navigate Congress more effectively from the start.

[17] But see Keena and Knight-Finley (2025), who find no evidence that Senators with business backgrounds—who are often wealthier—are more effective legislators than their peers.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.