**Remote Politics: How U.S. State Legislators Experienced their Jobs during COVID-19**

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**Abstract**

We surveyed U.S. legislators in 36 states in order to understand the consequences of virtual work, asking how fewer opportunities for face-to-face communications mattered for lawmakers' perceptions of their effectiveness and performance. Our results offer suggestive evidence that remote work during the pandemic changed the form and nature of legislature work, especially respondents' ability to move projects forward in the legislature and in their districts. Nonetheless, legislators seem committed to their roles as elected representatives.

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The global COVID-19 pandemic that began in March 2020 changed how legislatures function and how individual legislators carry out their work. Social distancing requirements, restrictions on travel and gatherings, and school closures limited elected bodies' ability to work in person. Parliaments around the world responded in different ways: some suspended their work temporarily, others continued to sit with fewer legislators, and others went fully virtual. Such changes may affect the quality of representation and democracy.

While many scholars tracked the political consequences of modifications to legislatures' functioning—documenting trends towards ad-hoc decision-making and reduced deliberation, for instance (Bassetti & Weiner, 2020; Griglio, 2020; Rayment & VandenBeukel, 2020)—we focus on how elected officials experienced the legislature as a workplace during the pandemic's early months. In this research note, we look at how 'remote politics'—shifting legislative work online—affected lawmakers' ability to do their jobs, from connecting with colleagues and constituents to moving forward projects of importance to them.

Our project taps into whether fewer opportunities for face-to-face communications matter for lawmakers' perceptions of their effectiveness and performance. Among the many potential consequences of remote work is the disappearance of opportunities for spontaneous communication with colleagues and staff. While many legislative tasks are performed in official settings, like committee meetings and plenary sessions, important interactions occur in-person but outside these official settings. Legislators confer in corridors, offices, and elevators. They speak in small groups or one-on-one when entering and leaving committee meetings or plenary sessions. Members also conduct work in non-legislative spaces, cultivating alliances, negotiating, and strategising in places like restaurants and golf courses. The public may be less attuned to

interactions in these unofficial settings, but researchers have acknowledged that informality—as well as the interplay between the official ad unofficial—matters for representation, deliberation, and policy outcomes (Azari & Smith, 2012; Waylen, 2017).

Our intuition was that remote politics would make interacting with colleagues more difficult during both official moments (e.g., committee meetings or party caucus meetings) and unofficial moments (e.g., in social situations). We anticipated that communicating unofficially or informally would become especially difficult, since restrictions on in-person gatherings would limit opportunities for impromptu conversations and social activities. We also anticipated that the loss of these opportunities coupled with other pandemic-related stressors—such as responding to increased constituent need—would diminish legislators' overall job satisfaction.

To test these expectations, we fielded a survey to U.S. state legislators between July and September 2020, contacting a total of 5,145 legislators via email. We contacted all legislators serving in the lower and upper houses of the 36 U.S. state legislatures identified by the National Council of State Legislatures as being full time or two-thirds time, receiving 81 complete responses from legislators in 30 states. While the responses are too few for definitive conclusions, they provide suggestive insights into how legislators fulfilled their roles during the pandemic summer, allowing future researchers to explore the strength and persistence of these effects.

We looked at three categories of legislative work: (1) interactions with colleagues and the ability to communicate and work effectively; (2) interactions with constituents; and (3) workloads and job satisfaction. We found that while most respondents felt able to maintain communication with their colleagues and constituents, their ability to carry out projects in the legislature and in their districts diminished. They reported increased workloads and decreased

job satisfaction, but not a decreased willingness to serve. Together, our results offer suggestive evidence that remote work during the pandemic changed the form and nature of legislature work, but that legislators seem committed to their roles as elected representatives.

**Legislatures during the Pandemic**

Many legislatures adapted their workplaces to the pandemic, instituting remote work for some tasks and reducing in-person presence for others. These changes raised practical and normative questions about legislatures' functions. For example, when parliaments continued in-person but with fewer members, this reduction raised concerns about equitable participation and representation, since the legislators who attended in person were more likely to live close to the capital and be relatively free of caring responsibilities (Malloy, 2020).

Other studies marked legislative oversight functions as the biggest pandemic casualty. Governments needed to respond quickly to reduce viral spread and address economic and social dislocation. Following regular budget cycles with ample time for deliberation and scrutiny risked leaving millions of citizens without the support they needed, leading many governments to reduce time for budget oversight (OECD 2020, 4-6). For instance, Canada's parliament and provincial legislatures continued to pass legislation, but with less scrutiny and fewer elected representatives taking part in (limited) deliberation (Rayment & VandenBeukel, 2020). Likewise, in the pandemic's early months, the U.S. Congress and several state legislatures used 'ad hoc procedures that do not promote robust deliberation or engaged policymaking' (Bassetti & Weiner, 2020, 2). Executive power also expanded, raising concerns about whether such power could be later reigned in (Bar-Siman-Tov, 2020; Griglio, 2020). Governments declared states of emergency in order to issue decrees that bypassed legislative oversight, allowing them to

mandate curfews and stay-at-home orders that would otherwise be constitutionally impermissible or questionable. Rushed legislative decision-making and executive dominance were born by circumstance and are perhaps not surprising, but could undermine effective representation in the long-run.

Less understood is how virtual work itself mattered for legislators' duties. Reduced opportunities for face-to-face interactions can mean fewer opportunities to swap information or talk about policy, further eroding legislators' ability to fulfill their deliberative, representative, and oversight functions. For example, Democratic congresswoman Lauren Underwood noted in a summer 2020 interview that her reliance on informal group text messages with colleagues had increased, and that she was getting more information about bills from outlets like *The Washington Post, Politico,* and *The New York Times* than from official congressional channels (Traister, 2020).

Yet while legislators may have spent less time deliberating or scrutinising legislation, their constituency service expanded, as voters' need increased and citizens sought help navigating coronavirus relief measures (Koop et al., 2020, 3). Since most COVID-relief programs and policies were fast-tracked and adopted without much deliberation, their parameters and criteria were often unclear, leaving potential recipients uncertain about qualifications and benefits. Legislators and their staff scrambled to decipher policies and advise constituents (Koop et al., 2020).

Taken together, research on legislatures during COVID-19 identifies the institutional and political consequences of pandemic policymaking: shifting power to the executive branch, reducing legislative oversight, and increasing constituent need. What about the consequences of working remotely on legislators as individuals: did they still feel effective? To our knowledge,

no academic research has tackled this question, but if legislators find virtual work difficult, then the worrisome trends at the institutional and political level will only accelerate. If legislators feel less able to talk to each other, to move forward projects, and to serve their constituents, then collective action to deliberate, hold executives accountable, and represent voters could falter further.

**Exploring the Consequences of Remote Politics**

We distributed an online survey via Qualtrics to 5,145 state legislators. We invited every lawmaker serving in the lower and upper houses in the 36 U.S. states that have professionalised legislatures: Alaska, Alabama, Arkansas, Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawai'i, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, North Carolina, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin. Research assistants compiled contact lists for lawmakers. Where lawmakers' emails were not available on legislatures' websites (e.g., California), assistants used contact lists from third parties, like advocacy organisations or newspapers. Each lawmaker received a personalised email invitation to participate (beginning 'Dear First-name Last-name'), though the email and the survey's informed consent made clear that the data themselves were collected anonymously. Since the personalised approach meant we could not send a single, simultaneous email, we randomised which states' legislators received the invitation on each day, with the initial invitation sent between July 13 and July 27, 2020, and the reminder sent between August 10 and August 25, 2020. In all, the survey was open between July 13 and September 30, 2020.

Our survey asked questions about legislators' interactions, communication, and work during the pandemic, their constituency service, and their job satisfaction. We wanted to know whether virtual work changed how frequently legislators engaged with different colleagues (i.e., their co-partisans, their constituency, their staff) for official and unofficial business; whether legislators felt working virtually changed their jobs; and how they perceived their effectiveness and workloads during the pandemic. Depending on the set of questions, we either reminded lawmakers to consider virtual work ( 'Please answer the questions based on carrying out your legislative work remotely, even if you did not work remotely for very long') or prompted them to consider the coronavirus period ('How much time you do spend on the following tasks now compared to before the coronavirus?'). By July 2020, many Republicans were already claiming that COVID-19 was a hoax or overblown, so our survey referred to the 'coronavirus period' instead of the 'pandemic.'

We received 81 complete responses from legislators in 30 states (no legislators responded from California, Indiana, Michigan, New Jersey, Ohio, and Virginia). Low response rates are typical for internet surveys, though ours (1.6%) is below the lower range (11.5%) reported by methodologists (Fisher & Herrick, 2013). We can neither make causal inferences nor explore state-by-state patterns. The sample is also too small explore patterns by gender, race/ethnicity, and partisan identification, and some respondents declined to answer these questions. Of those who answered, 62 were white, 36 were women and 33 were men, and 50 were Democrats and 27 were Republicans. Democratic women constituted the largest group (27), followed by Democratic men (17), Republican men (19), and Republican women (6).[1] Response bias is surely present, as those who responded likely differed from their colleagues in certain ways, such as being more predisposed to support academic research or more affected by the pandemic.

Nonetheless, our results show some patterns, offering preliminary insights into lawmakers' experiences with remote work, constituency service, and job satisfaction in the pandemic's early months.

Thirty-three respondents—about 40%—also answered our final, open-ended question, 'Lastly, is there anything else the researchers should know about your experiences working remotely during the coronavirus period?' The high response rate on this question further indicates bias, in that those legislators who answered our survey were most likely to have something to say. Nonetheless, they offered important comments that, while not representative of all U.S. state legislators, further illustrate the patterns detected in our quantitative results.

We initially divided respondents into two groups, based on whether their state legislature was adjourned or in-session during the survey period (July-September 2020). Importantly, in-session legislatures were not necessarily meeting continuously: many closed temporarily due to coronavirus outbreaks or were adjourned but called into special, shorter sessions, usually to address budget shortfalls or the May 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. Most in-session legislatures took a hybrid approach, such as holding committee meetings virtually but requiring in-person voting, so lawmakers would still have conducted some legislative business virtually.[2] Our division of adjourned versus in-session therefore captured not the frequency of virtual work, but lawmakers' overall workload.[3] However, we found systematic differences only on questions related to constituent contact and job demands: compared to respondents from adjourned legislatures, respondents from in-session legislatures reporting fielding more calls and messages from constituents, and so found their jobs more demanding. Below we report the proportions for all respondents in the sample.

**Interactions, Communications, and Legislative Work**

Our survey centred on understanding how legislators could connect with their colleagues and move their work forward when doing their jobs virtually. To set the stage, we asked lawmakers about their perceptions of virtual work—videoconference, email, and text or direct message—relative to in-person work. Most respondents actually felt quite comfortable with virtual communication tools: they were not worried about how they looked on videoconference (58%) and they were not concerned that their homes appeared on videoconference (84%). They did not worry about the security of virtual meetings (53%) nor did they worry about the security of emails, direct messages, and phone calls (62%). While most agreed that 'it's hard to convey the right tone over email' (78%) and 'I am careful about my tone in videoconference' (77%), this carefulness did not seem to inhibit communication. We asked, 'no matter who I need to talk to, I could just call [direct message/text] them,' and 55% agreed they could just call anyone and 80% agreed they could just text/direct message anyone. We also asked if legislators felt that videoconference changed their ability 'to make their own voice heard': while 36% reported a decrease, 52% reported no change.

Contrary to our expectations then, only a small proportion of respondents felt less able to communicate using virtual tools. In fact, several respondents used the open response to remind us that, given lengthy distances between the capitol and their districts, many lawmakers were using virtual tools well before the pandemic: a woman Democrat from Alaska noted that her state 'has excellent video and teleconference capability for the Legislature' and a woman Republican from Oregon commented that she already did much work remotely since she lived four hours from the state capitol. A woman respondent from Massachusetts appreciated how much money working remotely saved her, since she usually spent hundreds of dollars on gas,

meals, and hotels to travel to the capitol. Not all individuals and states are equally situated, though. A male Republican from Alaska said frankly, 'I'm a little more technically challenged than my younger colleagues.' And a male Republican from Oklahoma expressed frustration with his state's poor broadband, explaining that 'so some of us legislators that live away from the metropolitan areas have trouble with meetings and so that does affect our job remotely.'

We also asked respondents how working remotely affected their ability to carry out tasks related to their representative roles. For most items, respondents chose 'about the same': they knew the initiatives legislators in their party were working on (57%) and the priorities of their party leaders (66%). A slight drop-off occurred on questions related to the opposition and to policymaking, however. When asked whether they knew what legislators in the other were party were working on, 49% chose about the same and 50% chose worse than usual. On the ability to generate support for their ideas, 46% chose about the same and 41% chose worse than usual, and on the ability to move forward projects that are important to them, 40% chose about the same and 51% chose worse than usual.[4] Lastly, reporting on the frequency of convening colleagues to get something done in the legislature, 40.5% chose 'about the same' and 40.5% chose 'less than before.'

We also asked about respondents' interactions with colleagues when carrying out official business. Overall, 64% reported interacting with fewer colleagues than normal. Digging deeper echoed the pattern suggest above: what changed was not respondents' interactions with close colleagues, like co-partisans, but interactions with their more distant ones, like members of the opposition. For instance, a plurality said they interacted with their co-partisans, party leaders, legislative staff, and their district staff about the same (48%, 50%, 51%, and 56% respectively), with the remainder roughly evenly split on 'more than before' or 'less than before.'[5] By contrast,

only 47% rated their interaction with legislators in the other party as about the same, and 50% chose less than before—very few (only 3%) saw their interaction with the opposition increase.

Some open responses amplified respondents' concerns with getting work done. A woman Democrat from New York commented, 'I found communication with staff cumbersome and difficult. It takes longer to work through ideas and projects when working remotely and not all together in an office.' Others hinted at the institutional and political problems highlighted elsewhere, where pandemic concerns crowded out other policymaking efforts and legislative work slowed down overall. A woman Democrat from Minnesota wrote, 'The virus has made passing legislation outside of COVID related items challenging and requires more of me to keep communications with my community, local officials and colleagues flowing.' Another woman Democrat from Minnesota echoed this reaction, writing 'Our legislative agenda was severely limited due to burden of remote work.' A male Republican from Tennessee said, 'Our interaction with interest groups and lobbyist [*sic*] greatly declined, hampering the transfer of accurate information related to pending legislation.' And while we did not ask directly about executive dominance, three legislators offered comments that critiqued governors for overreaching and bypassing legislative decision-making (two male Democrats from Alaska and a woman Republican from Delaware).

Finally, we asked about informal communications and legislators' relationships with each other outside of official settings or duties. Working remotely had the largest effect in this category, as shown in Figure 1. Whether engaging in small talk, speaking to each other outside of meetings, or socialising, a plurality or majority of respondents reported that their informal interactions decreased. The largest decreases again occurred for respondents' most distant colleagues (legislators from the other party) and their optional interactions (socialising). Reading

these results together, we conclude that while most respondents felt comfortable with virtual tools and believed that working remotely did not change their overall engagement and interaction, some did report that communication and legislative work slowed down. The open responses suggest that while many could communicate at the same *frequency* as before, they perhaps could not communicate in the same *way* or with the same objectives as before, especially when advancing projects and sustaining relationships through informal and friendly interactions.

[Figure 1 here]


**Constituency Service**

We asked about legislators' interaction with their districts in the pandemic's early months. We expected constituency service to increase, but our focus remained how remote work affected legislators' ability to carry out this task. On the one hand, respondents felt that constituent service and communications increased overall, with over two-thirds of legislators spending more time helping constituents solve problems (69%) and more time answering phone calls or emails from the community (66%). Just over half of all respondents (51%) spent more time engaging with constituents through social media and most others (43%) reported the same as before. Perhaps unsurprisingly given an overall uptick in constituent need, most respondents (55%) reported no difference in their ability to know their constituents' main concerns when working remotely.

On the other hand, respondents reported that interactions leading to outcomes beyond addressing constituents' immediate needs either diminished or stayed the same. For instance, most respondents marked that virtual work meant they convened people to get something done in the district less than before (51%) or the same as before (38%) and that the onset of the pandemic

meant they held meetings with community members less than before (35%) or the same as before (42%). Overall, respondents were fairly split on whether working remotely changed how often they interacted with constituents and community leaders, with about one-third choosing less than before, one third choosing about the same, and one third choosing more than before. We interpret these findings along the lines revealed in the previous section: communication for immediate matters like constituency service went up, but interactions and meetings about projects either went down or stayed the same.

The open-ended responses underscored the increase in constituency service. The same woman legislator from Massachusetts reported that 'constituent calls for assistance are up ten-fold,' and a Democratic legislator from Maryland described her constituents as 'desperate' and 'overwhelmed.' A male Republican from Illinois said that 'people are suffering more every day from job losses and will never recover and sometimes it feels hopeless that we will be able to do anything for them.' This last comment helps unpack the seeming contradiction of increased constituent service coupled with fewer interactions, fewer meetings, and less advancement of projects in the district: voters' need increased and so their contact with their representatives increased, but legislators felt limited in their ability to help, especially when working virtually.

**Workloads and Job Satisfaction**

Finally, we wanted to know how working remotely affected legislators' workloads and job satisfaction, which would have implications for dedication and turnover. Not surprisingly, most respondents saw their workloads become more demanding (69%) and pursuing their goals as a state legislator more difficult (77%). The majority reported 'lots of change' (74%) in response to how much the coronavirus period changed their jobs. Most difficulties seemed linked

to the pandemic and carrying out legislative tasks remotely. When asked which statement best described why they chose 'less than before' on questions related to legislative tasks like moving projects forward, 79% of legislators selected 'it's hard without being in person.'

Yet based on our sample, we don't see evidence that higher workloads will affect attrition. Eighty-five percent of respondents said they would 'very much like' or 'like a great deal' to serve in the state legislature again. Yet, respondents were evenly split on whether their jobs became more rewarding since the coronavirus began: 35% chose less rewarding, 36% chose did not change, and 29% chose more rewarding.

Responses to the open-ended question reflected this variation. Some representatives found their work during the pandemic incredibly difficult: a woman Democrat from Massachusetts wrote, 'very stressful and not very satisfying.' The male Republican from Illinois who lamented ever helping his constituents said bluntly, 'this is not the way I want to continue,' and a male Republican from South Carolina said he would not be seeking re-election after 10 years of service. Yet others seemed willing to continue, with the woman Democrat from Minnesota who expressed frustration with virtual communication still saying, 'I love my job and am blessed to do this work.'

**Conclusion**

How did individual legislators experience the virtual work necessitated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic? While our sample of U.S. state legislators is small and unrepresentative, our results open a conversation about how the pandemic shaped lawmakers' jobs. We find suggestive evidence that U.S. state legislators adapted to virtual communication tools, continued to communicate with colleagues, and worked the same amount or more than

before—but that their ability to move projects forward diminished. Respondents also reported decreased interactions with more distant colleagues, like members of the opposing party, and reduced opportunities for small talk and socialising. As a whole, our survey offers a glimpse of the individual side of the institutional and political consequences of COVID-19: executive dominance and ad-hoc policymaking occurred while legislators reported a diminished quality in their relationships with each other, their relationships with their district, and their representative functions. Yet while they felt their jobs become more demanding and pursuing their goals more difficult, few expressed decreased interest in continuing to serve. This last finding offers some optimism: institutions depend largely on committed individuals, and so representative institutions may emerge from the pandemic battered but intact.

These tentative conclusions offer avenues for future research. We know that not all countries have the same commitments to representative democracy and that not all legislators are similarly situated. For U.S. lawmakers, the patterns we uncover likely vary by gender, race/ethnicity, ideology, and, given the politicisation of the pandemic along party lines, service in a Democratic or Republican state. Future surveys with larger samples could explore these covariates, as could qualitative studies using interviews. Future surveys can also improve upon our questions: we did not ask about specific legislative tasks, like writing or amending bills, which limited our ability to measure pandemic policymaking directly. We do offer some insight into how the pandemic matters for representation, however: representatives may adapt to virtual work environments, but online interactions are not perfect replacements for in-person legislative work.

**Data Availability Statement**

If accepted for publication, the dataset will be made available in an online repository and

cited in the final manuscript with a unique DOI.

Figure 1. Change in respondents' informal interactions while working remotely.
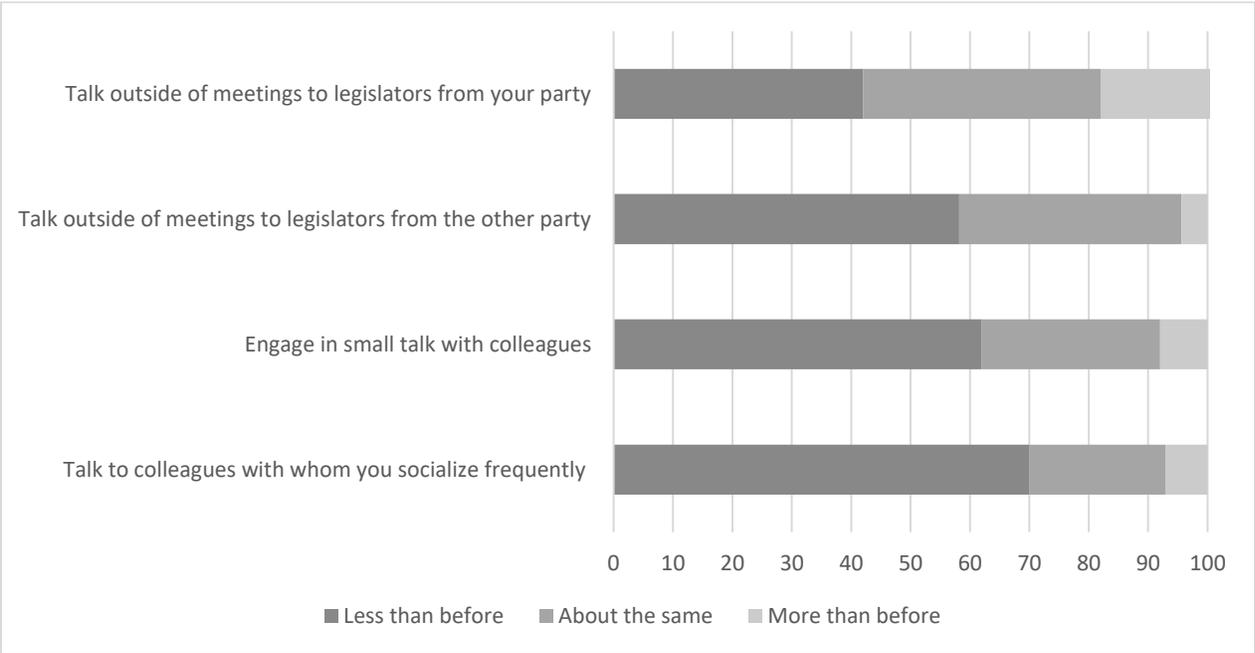


*Source: authors' data*

## Acknowledgments

## Notes

[1] We did analyze results by gender and party identification, but found few systematic differences. Where we uncovered a statistically significant difference, we could not discount that the results were spurious: for instance, Republicans were more likely than Democrats to view videoconference as inefficient, but no ideological difference between the parties explains this trend. Consequently, we do not report gender or party differences.

[2] Seven states had in-person legislatures with no virtual options for official business: Hawai'i, Louisiana, Minnesota, Missouri, North Carolina, Nebraska, and Tennessee. Legislators in these states still had meetings online, however. For instance, some Nebraska lawmakers met virtually to discuss challenging their chamber's in-person rules (Young 2020).

[3] We counted a legislature as adjourned if no meetings occurred during our survey period, and 'in-session' if either chamber met at least once during our period, no matter whether they met virtually or in-person. Adjourned states: Alaska, Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Illinois, Maryland, Oklahoma, Washington, and Wisconsin. In session states: Connecticut, Hawai'i, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Missouri, North Carolina, Nebraska, Nevada, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Tennessee.

[4] Most U.S. legislatures do not sit year-round. We asked respondents these questions both relative to when the legislature was in session and out of session, and 'about the same' was always the dominant answer. We report proportions relative to when the legislature is in session.

[5] Not all legislators will have their own staff, so this question asked about legislative staff generally.

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