

November 1973

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Charles W. Dunn

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Recommended Citation

Dunn, Charles W. (1973) "The Occupational Status of State Legislators: A Research Note," *Journal of Political Science*: Vol. 1 : No. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops/vol1/iss1/5>

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The Occupational Status of State Legislators: A Research Note

By CHARLES W. DUNN *
Clemson University

What is the occupational status of state legislators? Surprisingly, there is no available survey research of public opinion on this question. Neither the very thorough Iowa legislative survey¹ nor the extensive survey research by sociologists on occupational status have examined the public's perceptions of the occupational status of state legislators. In two nationwide studies of occupational status, conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (hereafter referred to as NORC) in 1947 and 1963, ninety occupations were studied, including U. S. Congressman, governor, city mayor and several other political occupations, but not state legislator.² The purpose of this research is to measure public perceptions of legislator status.

The question of state legislator status as perceived by the public is important for a variety of reasons. As with other institutions, state legislatures have been undergoing significant changes. For example, changes in state legislatures to annual and often longer sessions indicate that the occupation of state legislator will increasingly become more full-time. As legislatures move in the direction of full-time operations, knowledge of the occupational status of state legislators may provide some indication of the calibre of persons seeking legislative office. That is, assuming there is a relationship between the status of an occupation and the desire of well-trained persons to enter that occupation, understanding of the occupational status of state legislator may indicate if status will be a positive inducement for well-trained persons to become state legislators.

Another important assumption undergirding this research relates to the currently stated need to revitalize state government and state legislatures. Much recent commentary has been critical of the role of state

* The author wishes to express appreciation to the University of Illinois Research Board and to the Public Affairs Committee of the Union League Club (Chicago) for their financial support of this research.

¹ Laboratory for Political Research. *Iowa Legislative Research Project: Public Attitude Survey*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Department of Political Science, 1966.

² Charles M. Boujean and Richard J. Hill. *Sociological Measurements: An Inventory of Scales and Indices* (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1967), pp. 412-417.

governments and their legislatures in the federal system. One leading textbook on the legislative process has stated that "No institution has been more maligned in popular commentary, except perhaps those of organized crime and prostitution."³ Also evaluating the role of state legislatures, the Citizens Conference on State Legislatures states that:

[they] would undoubtedly rank low on most Americans' lists of governmental institutions that make a difference in dealing with the issues and problems that bother us . . .

State legislatures, in particular, have been thought of—to the extent that anybody has bothered to think about them at all—in essentially negative terms, as vehicles for preventing the passage of "progressive" legislation or for perpetuating archaic or unjust practices.⁴

If the legislature is the sum of its parts, then perhaps these negative comments suggest that legislatures have been criticized, at least to some extent, because they have not attracted well-qualified members interested in and capable of asserting leadership in state policy development. Should this be the case, then low occupational status may be part of the reason why well-qualified persons seek other occupations and why legislatures have a poor image.

This study hypothesizes that the occupational status of state legislators is low when compared with the status of other occupations which rank high in nationwide studies of occupational status. A positive test of this hypothesis would indicate that occupational status, as perceived by the public, is not a major inducement for well-qualified persons to seek careers as state legislators.

Methods

A survey schedule was administered to a random sample population of the voting age population of Illinois. Four hundred respondents were interviewed by telephone between March 22 and April 10, 1972. The survey was administered at a time when news about the legislature was at a minimum. The legislature was not in session, and there were no legislative campaigns in progress. The Survey Research Laboratory at the University of Illinois performed the administrative and technical tasks associated with the survey.

³ Malcolm Jewell and Samuel Patterson. *The Legislative Process in the United States* (New York: Random House, 1966).

⁴ Citizens Conference on State Legislatures. *The Sometime Government* (New York: Bantam, 1966), pp. 2 and 14.

In measuring public perceptions of state legislator status, respondents were asked to rate each of ten occupations on a scale of one (most desirable) to five (least desirable). This rating scale follows closely that used in the NORC studies of occupational status. These ten occupations which, except for state legislator, had been randomly selected from the 1963 NORC study, were randomly ordered on the survey schedule so as not to bias their order of appearance. State legislator was the only political occupation among the ten. To measure the relative status of state legislator among several political occupations, respondents were asked in another question to indicate whether state legislator is a more desirable occupation than each of the following: U. S. Congressman, governor, county board member and city mayor.

Findings

Table 1 indicates the public's perceptions of the desirability of each of the ten occupations studied in the Illinois survey. Table 2 provides comparative data on the ranking of these same occupations for both the Illinois and NORC surveys. Evident from these tables is that the public apparently does not associate a high degree of occupational status with the occupation of state legislator. In Illinois, five of the ten occupations studied rank above state legislator in occupational status. Those occupations ranking higher are medical doctor, college professor, architect, civil engineer and building contractor while those occupations ranking lower are newspaper columnist, carpenter, insurance agent and store clerk. State legislator, an occupation not studied in the NORC surveys, would most likely have ranked somewhere in the second one-third of the ninety occupations in those surveys. It should be noted that the Illinois survey results generally accord with the rankings of these ten occupations in the NORC surveys.

Table 3 compares the occupational status of state legislator with four other political occupations: U. S. Congressman, governor, city mayor and county board member. Generally suggested from Table 3 is that (1) executive governmental positions will tend to rank higher than legislative positions and that (2) occupational status will tend to increase as the level of government rises from local to state to national. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of these results and contradictory to the second conclusion is that city mayor ranks higher in occupational status than state legislator. It would be useful to conduct a similar study with an expanded list of occupations, including a county executive, to determine if executive positions rather consistently rank higher in status than legislative positions regardless of the level of government.

TABLE 1. Occupational Status in Illinois (in percentages)

Occupation	High	Degree of Status				Low	Don't Know	No Answer
	1	2	3	4	5			
Medical Doctor	75.7	12.2	4.5	2.0	1.5	2.7	1.2	
College Professor	43.5	30.2	11.2	3.7	4.7	5.0	1.5	
Architect	41.0	31.0	13.0	5.0	5.5	3.7	0.7	
Civil Engineer	30.2	40.7	15.5	5.2	2.7	4.5	1.0	
Building Contractor	24.0	33.0	27.2	6.7	3.7	4.2	1.0	
State Legislator	32.7	22.7	20.2	10.7	8.0	4.0	1.5	
Newspaper Columnist	19.7	24.0	30.2	12.0	8.7	4.0	1.2	
Carpenter	16.5	17.0	47.5	10.0	3.2	4.2	1.2	
Insurance Agent	10.2	16.5	30.2	20.0	17.7	4.2	1.0	
Store Clerk	7.2	9.0	21.2	28.2	28.7	4.2	1.2	

TABLE 2. Comparative Ranking of Occupational Status: Illinois and United States

Illinois Rank * (10 occupations)	(NORC) Rank ** (90 occupations)	Occupation	Illinois Mean Score ***
1	2	medical doctor	1.346
2	8	college professor	1.888
3	14	architect	1.984
4	21.5	civil engineer	2.042
5	31.5	building contractor	2.296
6	**	state legislator	2.349
7	46	newspaper columnist	2.641
8	53	carpenter	2.648
9	51.5	insurance agent	3.195
10	70	store clerk	3.659

* Rank is based upon the mean.

** The national numerical ranking locates the ten occupations of this study among the 90 occupations in the 1963 National Opinion Research Center study. State legislator was not ranked in the NORC study. See: Bonjean, et. al., *Sociological Measurement*, pp. 412-17.

*** The mean was computed from the respondents rating of each occupation on a scale of one (most desirable) to five (least desirable).

TABLE 3. Occupational Status of Political Positions

State Legislator Is More Desirable Than . . .	Yes	No	Same	Don't Know
U. S. Congressman	17.0	73.2	5.0	4.7
Governor	19.2	72.7	2.7	5.2
City Mayor	38.5	53.2	3.5	4.7
County Board Member	68.8	21.5	3.5	6.3

Discussion

Data in this study confirm the hypothesis that the occupational status of state legislators is low when compared with the status of other occupations which rank high in nationwide studies of occupational status. Additional studies might be conducted not only to test this hypothesis in other states, but also to determine if politicians and the public differ in their perceptions of occupational status. Politicians may have a different "pecking order" for occupational status than the public.

Confirmation of this study's hypothesis, however, points toward two tentative conclusions. First, occupational status, as perceived by public opinion, apparently is not a major inducement for persons seeking careers as state legislators. Second, as long as state legislator is considered lower in occupational status than such occupations as medical doctor, college professor, architect, civil engineer and building contractor, then perhaps we should generally not expect the most able persons to seek careers as state legislators.

This study, therefore, has important overtones for the future of state legislatures and state government. Revitalization of state legislatures as leaders in policy development for state governments in the federal system may not be expected to proceed as rapidly as it might if occupational status were a positive inducement for attracting the most able persons into legislative service.