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SHORT ARTICLE

Comparing Three Measures of Legislative Professionalism

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Abstract

We evaluate three measures of state legislative professionalism: Squire's (1992) index that measures professionalism relative to the US House, Bowen and Greene's (2014b) two-dimensional scaling, and legislative operating expenditures per member, an older measure that remains in occasional use. Replications of 18 recent articles show that these three measures regularly produce significantly different estimates of the effect of professionalism, particularly in longitudinal analysis; when they do, the choice of measure often affects whether other central variables retain a significant relationship with the dependent variable. These divergent results appear to reflect differences among these measures in terms of missingness, vulnerability to outliers, measurement of session length, and whether to benchmark to the US House. Researchers seeking a general indicator of professionalism should consider these differences when choosing an appropriate measure.

Keywords: state legislatures; legislative professionalism; legislative capacity; state politics; measurement

Introduction

A century ago the US Congress completed a striking process of modernization (Polsby 1968). Many state legislatures followed, transforming from "18th-century anachronisms" to become as "professional as many national legislatures" (Mooney 1995, 47). Variations in professionalism have since proven central to state legislative studies, especially after Squire (1992) united the field around a common measure. He combined three indicators—legislator salary, staff, and session length—each measured relative to the US House. If a state paid legislators 15% of the House salary, with a session 12% as long and 13% as much staff, he averaged these to 0.13. Squire's measure soon displaced others, and he later extended it to cover 1979, 1986, 1996,

Table 1. Usage of professionalism measures

	Pre-1992	1992–2019	2020–2023
Direct indicators			
Salary	58%	20%	5%
Session length	38%	14%	2%
Expenditures	35%	6%	5%
Staff	27%	11%	0%
Other	4%	0%	2%
Aggregate measures			
Squire	—	58%	62%
Grumm or Morehouse	19%	2%	0%
CCSL	19%	0%	0%
Bowen and Greene	—	2%	36%
Other	4%	13%	7%
N	26	216	42

Note. Use of multiple measures pushes totals above 100. "Expenditures" includes both non-salary expenditures and total expenditures.

2003, 2009, 2015, and 2021 (Squire 2017; 2024).[1] From 2000 through 2009, 60% of publications using a measure of professionalism used Squire's, rising to 69% in the 2010s.[2]

Bowen and Greene (2014b) later proposed a reformulation. First, to cover more years they replaced staffing with non-salary legislative operating expenditures per seat; thus, their three components were salary expenditures, non-salary expenditures, and session length. Second, they measured each indicator without reference to Congress. Third, they estimated two latent dimensions via multidimensional scaling. Their first dimension ("MDS1") captures the most variance and correlates with Squire's index; their second ("MDS2") captures residual differences among professional legislatures. From 2020 through 2023, 36% of relevant publications used MDS1/MDS2 and 62% used Squire's index, as shown in Table 1.

Here, we compare these popular measures to an alternative: legislative operating expenditures per member, adjusted for inflation and logged. Variants of this measure once enjoyed some currency, appearing in 35% of pre-1992 articles. It has retained occasional defenders, with some calling it "the purest measure of the total resources available to a legislature's members and … thus the best indicator of professionalism" (Berry, Berkman, and Schneiderman 2000; see also Van Dunk and Weber 1997; Carsey, Winburn, and Berry 2017; Brown and Garlick 2024). Operating expenditures include any appropriation toward staff, research databases, salary, information technology, office space, and so on. Any increase in Squire's or Bowen and Greene's inputs necessarily increases expenditures.

[1]Predecessors included rankings by the Citizens Conference on State Legislatures (1971) reflecting salary, session, staff, size, committees, leadership, facilities, procedures, and ethics; Grumm's (1971) factor analysis of salary, session, staff, operating expenditures, and bill introductions, modified by Morehouse (1981); and Bowman and Kearney's (1988) factor analysis of 32 legislative and executive indicators.

[2]To calculate these statistics, we identified studies using any measure of professionalism by searching Google Scholar, then reviewing publications citing and cited by major works. We located 283 publications, including 12 from the 1970s or earlier, 10 from the 1980s, 44 from the 1990s, 92 from the 2000s, 84 from the 2010s, and 42 from 2020 to June 2023.

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Conveniently, the Census Bureau has collected annual operating expenditures data for decades. We have footnoted details about how we compiled state-year data from 1977 through 2020.[3] After adjusting for inflation, we use the natural logarithm to account for the diminishing marginal impact of additional resources, thereby prioritizing proportional increases over dollar increases. In 2020 dollars, expenditures per member in the median state-biennium were $549 k, with a range from $49 k (New Hampshire 1977–1978) to $6,983 k (California 2019–2020); logged, the median is 6.3 with a range from 3.9 to 8.9. For brevity, we call this measure "expenditures."

This article compares Squire's index, MDS1/MDS2, and expenditures. We begin with replications of 18 recent articles that included a measure of professionalism. The choice of measure makes little difference in cross-sectional work, but we find significant differences in almost every study spanning eight or more time periods. Divergent results cannot show which measure is best, only that the choice demands reflection.

We then identify four differences among the measures that may explain these results. First, missingness in MDS1/MDS2 may contribute to subtle selection effects. Second, outliers in Squire's index and MDS1/MDS2 may drive results. Third, Squire's benchmarking to Congress prevents longitudinal analysis from disentangling changes in state and Congressional resources. Fourth, difficulties in measuring session length affect Squire's index and MDS1/MDS2. These latter two differences lead the three measures to manifest different longitudinal trends. On balance, we believe these differences favor expenditures over Squire's index or MDS1/MDS2, especially for longitudinal analysis. Of course, the choice hinges on the aspects of professionalism a particular theory emphasizes.

Replications

We first compare these measures by replicating as many studies as possible that (1) included a measure of professionalism, whether theoretical or as a control; (2) were published since 2015; (3) had working replication materials; and (4) did not have so many interactions as to preclude straightforward comparison. We chose one model from each of the resulting 18 articles, replicating it once using Squire's index (interpolated longitudinally), once using MDS1/MDS2 (reporting only MDS1, relegating MDS2 to a supplement), and once using expenditures.[4] We standardize each measure (as z-scores) to render coefficients comparable. To avoid selection bias we report all attempted replications (cf. Harden, Sokhey, and Wilson 2019).

[3]We downloaded a historical file of the Annual Survey of State Government Finances from the Census Bureau extending through 2008. For each state-year, it provides total state personal income ($millions) and legislative operating budget per $1 k of personal income; arithmetic yields the operating budget. We discarded years prior to 1977 for inconsistent data collection. We then downloaded annual files back to 2004 (overlapping the historical file to check consistency), extracting code E26 ("Current Operations—Legislative Services"). We converted to 2020 dollars using Bureau of Labor Statistics multipliers, divided by $1,000, and then calculated the logarithm.

[4]We use Squire's "corrected" values for 2015 (Squire 2017). We use MDS1/MDS2 scores from a yet-to-be-released update of Bowen and Greene (2014a). We preserve each study's specification (dropping pre-1977 observations) except for study A; since it has multiple observations per state, we cluster the standard errors. The original specification would bias our analysis toward significant results. (As it happens, we draw similar conclusions either way.)

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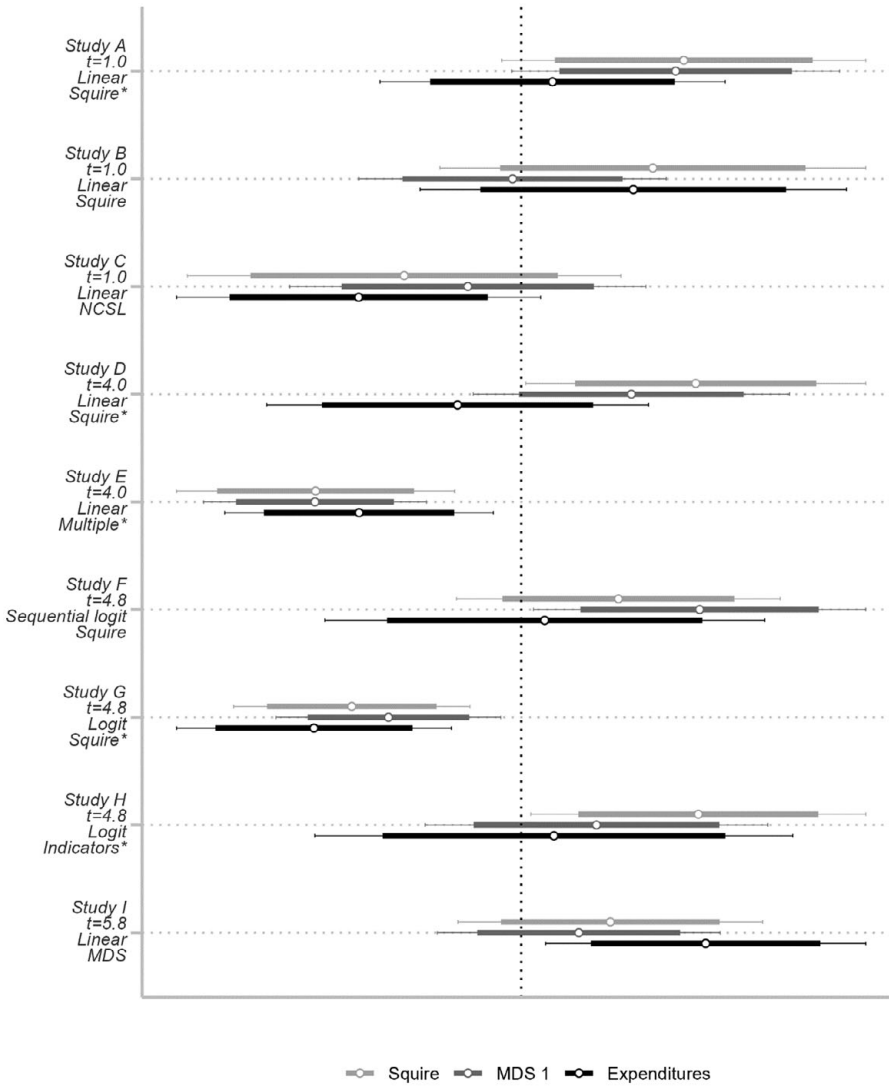

Figure 1. Coefficient plots with 84% and 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 1 summarizes our replications in coefficient plots having 84% and 95% confidence intervals, with studies ordered by average time periods *t* per state.[5] We label studies pseudonymously since our focus is not on these articles but on comparing these measures; details about each study appear in a supplement.[6] Coefficients

[5]Due to missingness, MDS1/MDS2 models may have fewer periods.

[6]Alphabetically, we use Barber, Bolton, and Thrower (2019), Boehmke and Shipan (2015), Bowra and Makse (2022), Brown and Garlick (2024), Callaghan and Karch (2021), Caron (2022), Emrich (2022), Hansen and Clark (2020), Kettler, Fowler, and Witt (2022), LaCombe and Boehmke (2021), Leonard (2022), Makse (2022), Rogers (2017), Shay (2021), Strickland (2019), Strickland and Crosson (2023), Swift and VanderMolen (2016), and Wolak (2020).

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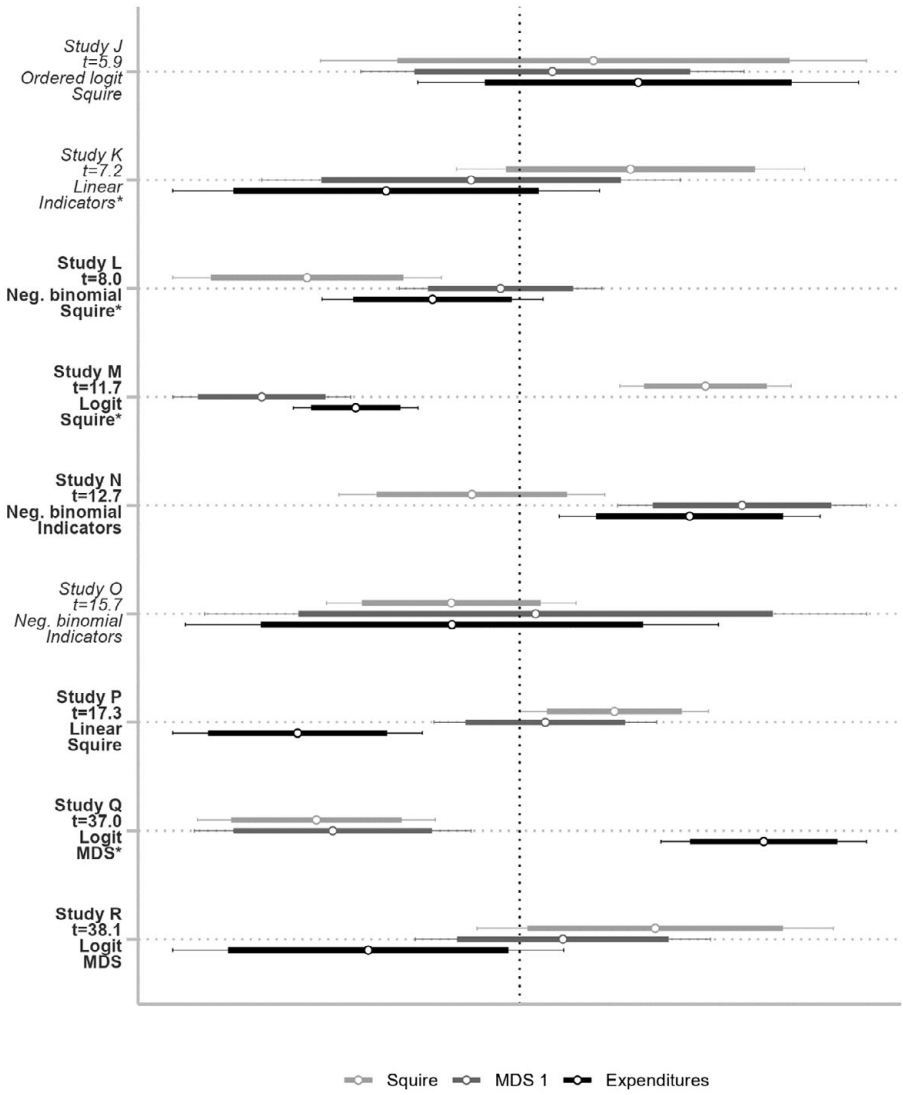

Figure 1. (*Continued*)

differ significantly from zero ($p < 0.05$ two-tailed) if their 95% confidence interval does not cross the dotted vertical zero line. Coefficients differ significantly from one another ($p < 0.05$ two-tailed) if their 84% confidence intervals do not overlap (cf. Goldstein and Healy 1995; Knol, Pestman, and Grobbee 2011); studies labeled in boldface have at least one such difference. We give each study's functional form and original measure; asterisks mark studies that reported significance for their chosen measure ($p < 0.05$ two-tailed).[7] Some studies naturally have larger coefficients

[7]"NCSL" is an ordinal measure from the National Conference of State Legislatures. "Indicators" means variables like salary or session length.

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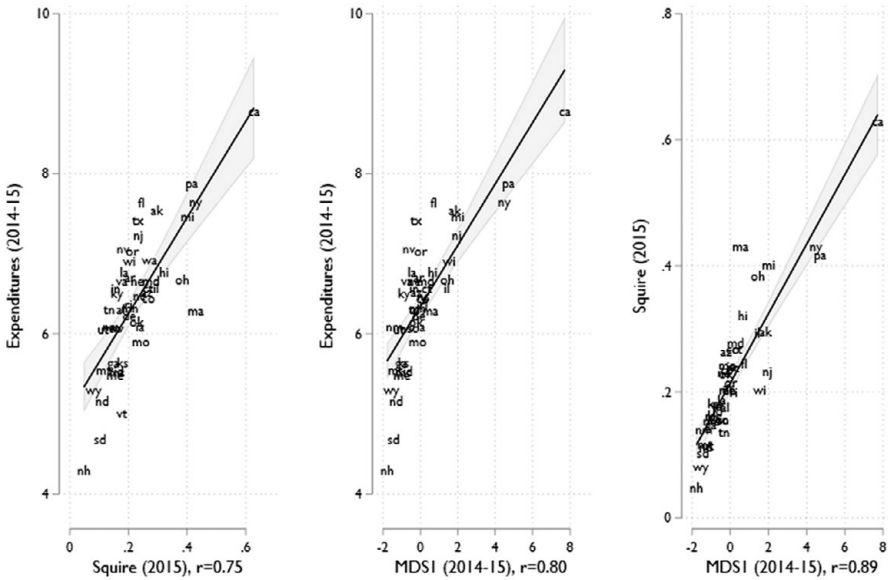

Figure 2. Cross-sectional scatterplots with linear trend and 95% confidence interval.

than others, but what matters here is only whether the coefficients for a particular study differ; to use all visual space, the horizontal axis thus has a unique range for each study.

In studies, D, F, H, I, L, N, and P, some measures of professionalism yield a coefficient significantly different from zero while others do not. The more pertinent question, though, is whether the three professionalism coefficients differ from one another. No significant differences arise when $t < 8$—unsurprisingly, since all three measures correlate at any cross-sectional moment, as illustrated in Figure 2. However, significant differences arise in six of the seven studies having $t \geq 8$, even though all six included longitudinal corrections such as year fixed effects. In studies M and N, expenditures and MDS1 align against Squire's index; in studies P and Q, Squire's index and MDS1 align against expenditures; in study L, Squire's index and MDS1 differ significantly; in study R, expenditures and Squire do.

Critically, in four of these six studies, the choice of measure affects the article's central conclusion. In studies L and N, professionalism itself is a central variable. In study P, the central variable (term limits) retains significance only with Squire's index and expenditures, not MDS1/MDS2. In study R, the central variable (legislative partisan swing) retains significance only with MDS1 and expenditures, not Squire's index. Only in studies M and Q do the central findings retain significance regardless of the measure, though their magnitude wobbles.

To be clear, we most emphatically do not claim to have debunked these studies. First, most of them include several models, but we have tested only one from each. Second, we need not expect findings to be robust to all three measures. After all, "scholars should take care to choose the appropriate measure of the concept that best fits the causal relationships under examination" (Bowen and Greene 2014b, 279). If a paper's theory requires longitudinal benchmarking to Congress, for example, then it

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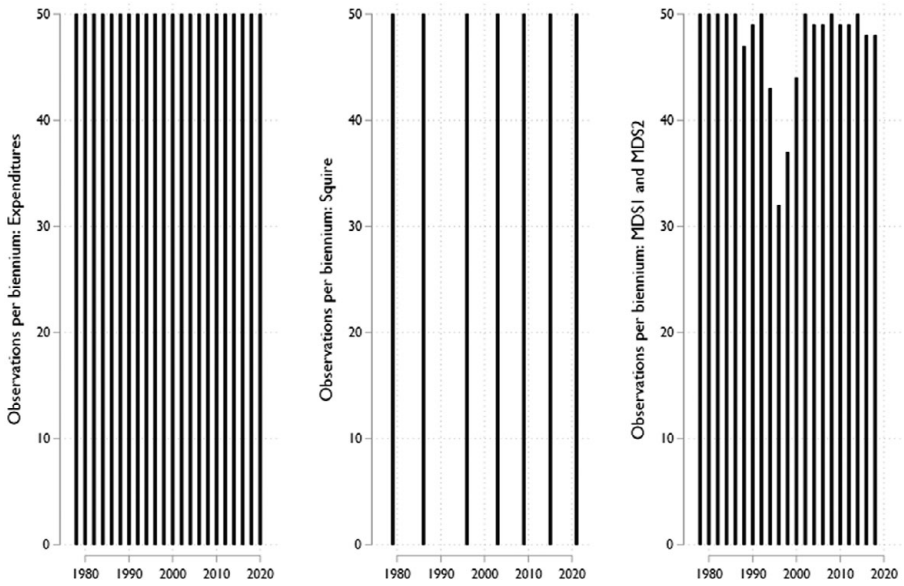

Figure 3. Data availability.

makes sense to consider only the Squire index. We therefore do not claim to have debunked these studies, only to have shown that the choice of professionalism measure matters. We now consider features of each measure that might affect this choice.

Properties of each measure

Using data from 1977–2020, we compare these measures in terms of missingness, vulnerability to outliers, and longitudinal trends, with the latter reflecting difficulties in measuring session length as well as Squire's decision to benchmark to Congress.

Missingness

Figure 3 plots each measure's coverage by state-biennium since 1977. Expenditures have no missingness. Squire's index is available for only the seven years given above, though researchers often apply linear interpolation. MDS1/MDS2 miss several state-biennia, especially in the 1990s. Missingness is not benign; listwise deletion of incomplete observations causes "loss of valuable information at best and severe selection bias at worst" (King et al. 2001).

Vulnerability to outliers

Figure 4 contains density plots for each measure overlaid on normal distributions having the same mean and standard deviation, with 1,110 state-biennia for expenditures, 350 for Squire's index, and 999 for MDS1/MDS2. A normal distribution has a kurtosis of 3; higher kurtosis in Squire, MDS1, and MDS2 implies potential outliers.

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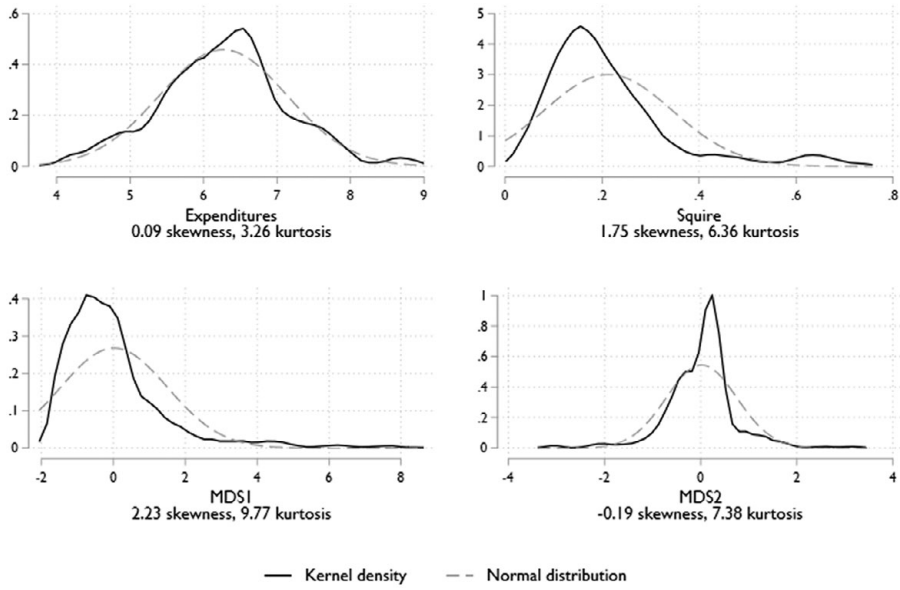

Figure 4. Density plots.

Expenditures have no observations more than three standard deviations from the mean, but Squire's index has 13 such observations, MDS1 has 24, and MDS2 also has 24. California is especially problematic, lying 3+ standard deviations from the mean in four of the seven periods for Squire, 17 of 19 for MDS1, and 10 of 19 for MDS2. Researchers using these measures should test whether outliers like California affect their results.

Longitudinal properties

Figure 5 plots biennial medians for each (standardized) measure. Scholars claim that legislatures began modernizing in the 1960s–1970s (Mooney 1994, 70) until provoking backlash in the 1990s–2000s (Kousser 2005). Expenditures follow this expectation, rising before leveling off. By contrast, Squire's index declines until 2003, rises, then declines. MDS1 and MDS2 show no trend. (We limit these charts to the 27 states with the least missingness in MDS1. Trends are similar elsewhere.)

Two issues drive these differences. First, Squire's benchmarking to Congress means the median state's score can rise (1) if the median state increases its resources or (2) if Congress decreases its own. Indeed, his index's 2009–2015 increase reflects "decisions at the congressional level," where "both the House and Senate met for far fewer days … than in earlier decades" (Squire 2017, 367). In cross-sectional analysis, Squire's benchmarking may ease interpretation, benefiting readers. In longitudinal analysis, however, it conflates state and Congressional professionalism, leaving it unclear whether "state legislatures [are] getting more professional or [Congress is] just stagnating" (Squire 2024, 5). As shown earlier, Squire's index yields significantly different results in six of the seven studies with $t > 8$, even though all these studies included year fixed effects or other corrections. We infer that such techniques cannot account for Congressional benchmarking.

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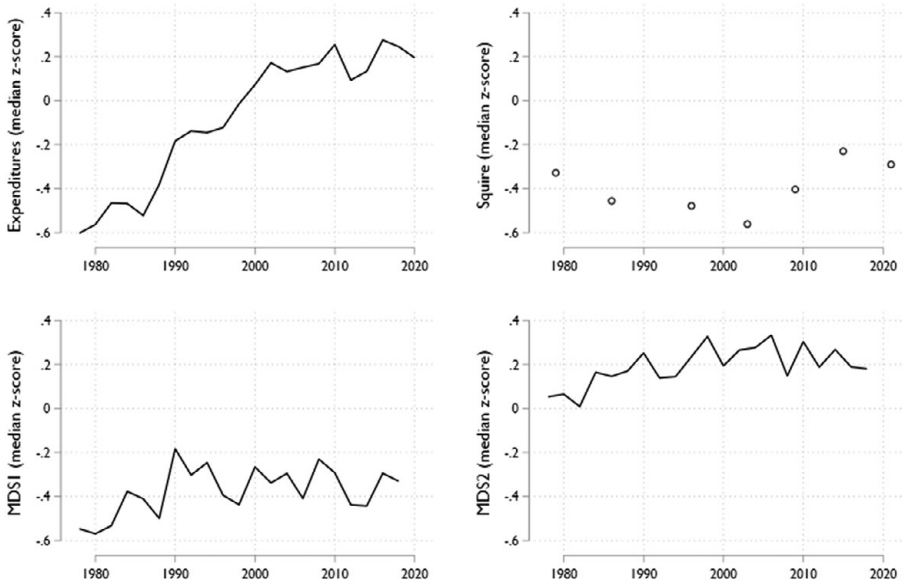

Figure 5. Biennial medians.

Second, both Squire's index and MDS1/MDS2 face difficulties in measuring session length, affecting their longitudinal trends. Both measures begin by pulling session lengths from annual editions of the *Book of the States* (e.g., Council of State Governments 2021). Though invaluable, "BOS coding of session length can be problematic" (Bowen and Greene 2014b, 284), requiring "caution … in employing [BOS] session data" (Squire 2017, 364). For starters, in states with a constitutional limit on session length *Book of the States* reports, for example, "100C" (100 calendar days) or "100 L" (100 legislative days). To align these scales Squire and MDS1 multiply calendar days by 5/7 to eliminate weekends, but this fix "does not account for legislatures that begin their schedules at a leisurely pace and only in the last … few weeks meet every weekday" (Rosenthal 1996, 174).

Greater difficulties arise in states without a constitutional limit. In these cases, *Book of the States* sometimes reports only each session's start and end dates. In the 2021 edition, for example, Wisconsin reports a general session spanning January 7, 2019, through January 4, 2021. In this case, multiplying by 5/7 will produce an overestimate—a problem that "escalate[s] dramatically" in states reporting the lengthiest sessions (Squire 2017, 364).

There is a separate question of which days to count. Squire counts days in general sessions, while Bowen and Greene add special sessions. Either approach "omits work done during the … interim, and therefore exaggerates the time disparity between legislatures with longer and shorter sessions" (Rosenthal 1996, 174).[8] For these and other reasons, estimates of session length are noisy, even erratic; close inspection

[8]Other reasonable options exist, such as counting dates on which votes were held (e.g., Brown 2023, 152), though this approach omits days when other activities occurred. Whether to include non-voting days, special session days, or interim study days will depend on the theory being tested.

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reveals many cases where the estimate for some state changes by 50% or more from one biennium to the next even as the number of bills remains steady.[9]

In sum, expenditures have less missingness and fewer outliers than Squire's index and MDS1/MDS2; moreover, Squire's benchmarking to Congress and the unreliability of session length cause MDS1/MDS2 and Squire's index to yield longitudinal trends differing from expectations.

Conclusion

Squire's index helped make professionalism a critical feature of state legislative studies. The discipline is indebted to him for sharing and updating his index and to Bowen and Greene for similar labors. We have compared these measures to an older alternative: Legislative operating expenditures per member, adjusted for inflation and logged. Replications show that results for professionalism and other independent variables often hinge on the choice of measure, at least in longitudinal analysis.

Diverging replications cannot show which measure is best, only that the choice matters. We have explored each measure's missingness, vulnerability to outliers, and longitudinal trends, with the latter reflecting difficulties in measuring session length and whether to benchmark to Congress. In some cases, we can link these differences to specific replications. For example, omitting California or constraining all models to the same non-missing observations changes the results for studies D, K, and R; in these cases, outlying observations mingle with the selection effects caused by missingness.[10]

Still, missingness and outliers affect only these three studies in this manner, suggesting that longitudinal differences bear most responsibility for the conflicting results in studies L, M, N, P, and Q. These differences apparently reflect Squire's benchmarking to the US House and the use of session length in Squire's index in MDS1/MDS2. Measuring professionalism as expenditures avoids both problems. Indeed, expenditures may be seen as a cleaner version of Bowen and Greene's measure; it keeps two of their components (salary expenditures per member and non-salary expenditures per member) while discarding the third, problematic one (session length).

Best scientific practice requires developing a clear conceptual definition before deriving a valid and reliable operational measure (Jackman 2008). If a study's conceptualization of professionalization requires direct consideration of session length, salary, or some other indicator, then that study would be best served by setting aside all three measures considered here in favor of direct indicators. Likewise, if a study's theoretical conceptualization compares state legislative resources to those of Congress, then it would be appropriate to use a measure benchmarked to Congress. However, most studies replicated here sought only a general, unidimensional measure. In those cases, this analysis favors expenditures rather than Squire's index or

[9]We compare estimated session lengths for California, Michigan, and Wisconsin in the Bowen-Greene data to bill totals from LegiScan.

[10]In study D, Squire's index loses significance in both alternative specifications, so all measures concur on a null estimate. In study K, omitting California yields a newly significant difference between Squire's index and MDS1. In study R, Squire's index and expenditures cease to differ significantly under either alternative. A supplement holds complete results.

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MDS1/MDS2. Expenditures have no missingness, low vulnerability to outliers, and longitudinal trends consistent with the literature's expectations. As a perk, this measure is portable outside the states, creating intriguing opportunities for comparative analysis.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at http://doi.org/10.1017/spq.2024.23.

Data availability statement. Replication materials are available on SPPQ Dataverse at https://doi.org/10.15139/S3/TK7M (Brown and Mitchell 2024).

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