



E-PARCC

COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE INITIATIVE

Syracuse University

Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs

Program for the Advancement of Research on Conflict and Collaboration

COMBAT AND COLLABORATION IN SEATTLE'S HISTORIC MINIMUM WAGE DEBATE

TEACHING NOTE

NOTE: In September, 2017, Ed Murray resigned as Mayor of Seattle following a series of allegations of child sexual abuse in the 1980's from a family member and young people under his care. As the allegations were previously unreported, this case maintains an accurate depiction of the way Ed Murray's colleagues, employees, and constituents viewed him in 2014. Instructors should use their discretion about whether to introduce this information when teaching the case. While it is ancillary to the central learning objectives and purpose of the case, it complicates any analysis of Murray's overall leadership.

This case was written by Erik H. Houser with the advisement of Craig Thomas, Professor, and Stephen Page, Associate Professor, of the Daniel J. Evans School of Public Policy and Governance at the University of Washington. It was the winning case in E-PARCC's 2017-2018 Competition for Collaborative Public Management, Governance, and Problem-Solving Teaching Materials. The case is intended for classroom discussion and not to suggest either effective or ineffective responses to the situation depicted. It may be copied as many times as needed, provided that the authors and E-PARCC are given full credit. [E-PARCC](#) is a project of the Collaborative Governance Initiative, Program for the Advancement of Research on Conflict and Collaboration- a research, teaching and practice center within Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs.

Uses of the Case

This case, “Collaborative Leadership and Seattle’s Historic Fight for \$15,” provides a gripping and vivid example of an innovative policy making process in a major city. Students are thrust into the action as the Mayor of Seattle, forced to find common ground between the age-old foes of labor and business after creating a committee of stakeholders to design a new minimum wage law. If the Mayor is successful, Seattle will become the first major city in the country to raise its minimum wage to \$15 per hour.

The case is an effective real-life example for public management students to apply frameworks of agenda setting, stakeholder analysis and mobilization, conflict resolution, and negotiation. It can be taught in the first year of public administration, policy, or affairs programs, in a negotiation course, or as a key component of an executive program course. It fits best in courses that focus on leadership and the intersection of policymaking and politics. The case also has significant applicability to business administration programs due to its showcase of a modern public negotiation between business and labor.

Because of the vast, interdisciplinary nature of the case, it is likely best used near the end of a syllabus so that students can draw upon readings and frameworks from across the entire quarter or semester.

Summary

The case chronicles Seattle’s effort in 2014 to become the first major city in the country to pass a law raising its minimum wage to \$15 per hour. It’s told from the perspective of protagonist Ed Murray, the newly elected Mayor of Seattle who attempts to broker a deal by assembling a large and diverse committee of affected stakeholders to write the law.

Meetings were confidential at the time, but contemporary interviews with Mayor Murray and 10 committee members reveal the narrative of what happened behind closed doors. Research was supplemented by media reports and the book “The Fight for Fifteen” authored by one of the committee co-chairs.

The case begins on April 24th, 2014, a key day nearly four months into the process where committee deliberations between labor and business have collapsed in chaotic infighting and disagreement. Mayor Murray had invited the press to hear an announcement of a deal, and now must decide what to do about the more than 30 members of the media outside his office. He must also come up with a strategy to bring the committee back together and reach a compromise before its deadline, or choose to abandon the committee process and introduce his own plan.

It rewinds from there to give background on A) Mayor Murray's career, B) the origins of the national fight against income inequality, and C) Washington's local elections in 2013 that led to Murray becoming Mayor, the election of socialist City Councilmember Kshama Sawant, and the voters of suburban SeaTac approving their own \$15 plan. After being elected, Murray assembles a 24-member committee and gives it four months to reach a deal. The back half of the case is an account of what happened in the committee behind closed doors.

The committee believes multiple times that it has found a compromise, but each time it falls apart due to cold feet, misunderstanding, and poor negotiating. The case concludes back on April 24th as Murray's efforts to salvage the latest compromise have failed and he must now decide what to do.

Also included is a straightforward epilogue letting students know what ultimately happened. Mayor Murray faces the media in an excruciating press conference and admits he hasn't reached a deal, and then continues to negotiate with the committee over the next week. Just before the deadline, the business side essentially folds after realizing the deal on the table is the best deal they will get. After being forwarded to the Seattle City Council for approval, Mayor Murray signs the historic plan into law on June 3rd, 2014.

Main Learning Objectives

- Think critically about the intersection between politics and policy in public administration
- Conduct a stakeholder analysis
- Apply the advocacy coalition framework to describe and explain the policymaking environment
- Analyze the extent and origins of the "policy window" for the \$15 minimum wage proposal
- Identify the primary motivators and best alternatives facing each negotiating party
- Explore the benefits and drawbacks of "venue shopping" to bypass the traditional legislative process
- Articulate the effects that the ballot measure process can have on a policy process
- Analyze the political pressures that face an elected official

Key Issues

Decision Point

The case ends with Mayor Murray facing multiple decisions in the first major test of his term in office. The immediate issue he faces is how to handle the assembled media outside his office. Drawing upon his experiences in political crisis communications, the Mayor must decide what information to make public at risk of harming negotiations even further. More importantly, Murray must decide what to do about his dysfunctional committee. He knows that the committee has the potential to reach a deal, but isn't sure if the makeup of the G-8 is correct. He needs to decide if he's missing anyone from the negotiating room, or whether to abandon the process entirely and bring his own plan to City Council without any stakeholder input. With just a week to go until the committee's deadline, time is running out to reach a deal and it may make sense for Murray to save face while he can and declare the committee a failure.

Conflict Resolution

If Mayor Murray does keep the committee process intact, he must gather all available information and decide how to bring the group back together and help them reach a deal before the deadline. He knows that business is in a worse negotiating position than labor thanks to the twin threats of a far-left ballot measure and Murray possibly introducing his own proposal, but doesn't know whether business will see the writing on the wall.

External Pressure and the Initiative Process

An underlying theme throughout this case is the external pressure on Mayor Murray and the committee from socialist City Councilmember Kshama Sawant and her "15 Now" organization. As the committee deliberates, Sawant and her allies are threatening to place a ballot measure in front of voters later that year that will be an uncompromising and immediate wage increase to \$15. If Sawant moved forward with an initiative, it's likely that the business community would place their own competing measure on the ballot as well. This is a worst-case scenario for Mayor Murray, as it threatens to overshadow the rest of his first-year agenda and potentially hurt his chances for reelection.

Sawant and 15 Now are examples of how effective a non-governmental advocacy movement can be, influencing elected officials and members of the committee through their frequent rallies at City Hall and relentless media coverage. Traditional labor negotiators and Mayor Murray know

that Councilmember Sawant, despite their many disagreements, frequently serves a helpful role for their purposes. Her far-left position sets the parameters of the debate and gives many other organizations political cover to pursue a stronger policy than might otherwise be possible.

Additionally, Sawant and 15 Now's bludgeoning use of the threat of a voter initiative is reflective of the strong direct democracy laws in Washington state. If the committee process fails, or if they produce a proposal that she disapproves of, she could at any point begin gathering signatures to put her own proposal directly in front of voters. As students consider any part of this case, they should never stop examining the ways that the threat of an initiative colored every decision made by the Mayor and members of the committee.

The Inevitability of \$15

One key issue seeded in the case but not explicitly spelled out is among the most important reasons that a deal was eventually reached: for the most part, the business negotiators had already accepted the premise of raising the minimum wage to \$15 before the committee began meeting. Historical and political context for students will help them understand just how radical the idea of a \$15 minimum wage was in 2013 and 2014. Even the most progressive politicians typically fell well short of calling for such a dramatic raise, making the support of Ed Murray and Kshama Sawant for \$15 groundbreaking from both a local and national perspective. Similarly, most of the business negotiators came in believing that \$15 was an inevitability, and the best they could do was slow it down and blunt the impact. Students can examine the reasons why business felt it was an inevitability, and whether accepting the premise so early in negotiations left them in a worse position against labor.

Suggested Frameworks

Agenda Setting

Frameworks and readings on the concept of agenda setting will allow students to analyze the unique confluence of events that allowed Seattle to be the first major city in the country to raise its minimum wage to \$15 per hour. The right set of local political events collided with the national movement against income inequality to create an ideal set of circumstances for the issue to be taken up.

Kingdon is a particularly effective reading for this case because it will help students think critically about the intersection between politics and policy in the case, looking at the multiple streams of problem, policy, and politics to determine where \$15 placed. Heath and Heath and Boynton both help identify some of the 'viral' characteristics that helped \$15 and its grassroots movement gain

so much momentum.

- Kingdon, “Wrapping Things Up” in *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers, Inc. 1995, Chapter 9.
- *Heath and Heath, Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*. New York, N.Y.: Harper Collins, 2007, pp. 1-62.
- Boynton and Richardson, “Agenda setting in the twenty-first century” in *New Media & Society*, 2015.

Stakeholder Analysis and Mobilization

Readings on stakeholder analysis will further help students think critically about the environment that Mayor Murray and the committee were operating in, letting students survey the political landscape in Seattle and identify affected stakeholders and their motivations. These readings fit well with the end of the case as the Mayor is contemplating whether to keep, modify, or eliminate the committee. Mapping stakeholders per Brinkerhoff and Crosby could let students identify the importance of who was already at the table and decide whether any constituencies were missing who could have helped forge a deal.

Additionally, applying the Jenkins-Smith advocacy coalition framework has many uses, particularly in examining and mapping the beliefs of Mayor Murray and the stakeholders. This will help students identify which issues certain stakeholders may be willing to compromise on and what issues are less flexible.

- Brinkerhoff and Crosby, *Managing Policy Reform*, Chapters 6, 8, and 10.
- Dobel and Day, A Note on Mapping: Understanding Who Can Influence Your Success, *Electronic Hallway*.
- Jenkins-Smith, et al., “The Advocacy Coalition Framework,” in *Theories of the Policy Process*, Westview Press, 2014, Chapter 6, pp. 183-204.
- Wolfe, Jones, and Baumgartner. “A failure to communicate: Agenda setting in media and policy studies” in *Political Communication*, 2013, Vol. 30(2), pp. 175-192.

Conflict Resolution

Mayor Murray and the committee face an obvious impasse at the end of the case that has familiar themes of the policy fights between labor and business in the 20th century, but transplanted into the modern arena. Readings on conflict resolution can help students put themselves in the shoes of the Mayor and the two primary negotiating groups before strategizing

on ways to resolve the conflict and avoid a ballot initiative fight.

Students can use readings to determine the ways that the negotiators' organizations affected their positions and behavior, and how the Mayor and the committee can engage in conflict communication strategies.

- Brinkerhoff and Crosby, *Managing Policy Reform*, Chapter 11.
- Susskind and Thomas-Larmer, "Conducting a Conflict Assessment" in *The Consensus Building Handbook*, Sage Publications, 1999, Chapter 2, pp. 99-136.
- Fisher and Ury, *Getting to Yes*. 1981, Chapter 1-2.
- Carpenter and Kennedy, *Managing Public Disputes: A Practical Guide to Handling Conflict and Reaching Agreements*, 1988, Chapters 2-3.
- Amsler, "Negotiating for the public good" in *The Handbook of Public Administration*, 2015. 508-527.

Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement (BATNA)

Instructors of more negotiation-heavy courses can take this case in a different direction to focus more intently on the negotiations between the two sides of the committee. This could go a number of ways, but one idea is to use it in a section on negotiation and consensus-building tools to evaluate the effectiveness of the committee process that Mayor Murray set up, and examine the positions of business and labor relative to each other at the end of the case. A suggested framework is Fisher and Ury's "best alternatives to a negotiated agreement" (BATNA), which will help shed light on where business and labor stood, asking students to look at the alternatives each side had if they chose to withdraw from the committee process.

- Fisher and Ury, *Getting to Yes*. 1981, Chapter 3.

External Advocacy and the Initiative Process

No matter where the case is taught in a course, an instructor can work in the themes of socialist Councilmember Sawant and her external advocacy group providing pressure and the threat of the possible voter initiative. Students can also examine how this pressure influenced Mayor Murray to adopt his own more outsider process, "venue shopping" by abandoning the traditional City Council legislative process to create the committee of affected stakeholders.

- Adams, "Citizens, Interest Groups, and Local Ballot Initiatives" in *Politics & Policy*,

2012. pp 43-68.

- Holyoke, Brown, and Henig, “Shopping in the Political Arena” in *State and Local Government Review*, 2012 44(1), 9-20.
- Pralle, “Venue Shopping, Political Strategy, and Policy Change: The Internationalization of Canadian Forest Advocacy” in *Journal of Public Policy*, 2003. 23(3), 233-260.

Other Uses

Executive Leadership: Instructors could draw upon the details in the case about Mayor Murray’s background and leadership style to show the way that one elected official led a complicated collaborative policymaking process.

Executive Master’s Programs: An executive program could find extensive use of this case due to its broad applicability across a variety of frameworks and lessons. After examining from a leadership perspective, students could conduct a policy analysis using the included epilogue exhibit of the final legislation that was signed into law.

Business Administration Programs: MBA courses on negotiation, labor relations, and government relations will find a lot of applicability from this case due to its narrative of a modern, nontraditional business-labor negotiation. Students can look at the way that the business side entered into the process and conducted itself during the negotiation.

Other Materials

The website of the Mayor of Seattle has a page dedicated to the \$15 minimum wage law, listing the details of the policy and answering frequently asked questions. The city Office of Labor Standards also has a number of resources including a one-pager on the law as passed.

- Office of the Mayor, “\$15 Minimum Wage.”
<http://murray.seattle.gov/minimumwage/>
- Office of Labor Standards, “Minimum Wage Ordinance.”
<http://www.seattle.gov/laborstandards/ordinances/minimum-wage>

Suggested Lesson Plan for an Introductory Leadership Course within a Public Administration Program

Student Learning Objectives

- Articulate policy positions and goals of major players in a complicated policymaking process
- Assess leadership of an elected official principal as they preside over the policy process
- Examine the ways external pressure and the threat of a ballot initiative can affect a policy debate
- Use conflict resolution frameworks to examine negotiations and devise a new strategy moving forward

Primary Readings

- Brinkerhoff and Crosby, *Managing Policy Reform*, Chapter 11.
- Susskind and Thomas-Larmer, "Conducting a Conflict Assessment" in *The Consensus Building Handbook*, Sage Publications, 1999, Chapter 2, pp. 99-136.
- Holyoke, Brown, and Henig, "Shopping in the Political Arena" in *State and Local Government Review*, 2012 44(1), 9-20.

Secondary Readings

- Fisher and Ury, *Getting to Yes*. 1981, Chapter 1-2.
- Carpenter and Kennedy, *Managing Public Disputes: A Practical Guide to Handling Conflict and Reaching Agreements*, 1988, Chapters 2-3.
- Amsler, "Negotiating for the public good" in *The Handbook of Public Administration*, 2015. 508-527.

Class Discussion Recommendations

Begin discussion by drawing on frameworks from earlier in the quarter/semester by asking students to identify why this issue started in the first place.

Question: What about the "\$15 minimum wage" made it such a popular idea for labor and then the general public?

Question: Using the background provided in the case, why was this a good time for labor to pursue a \$15 minimum wage in Seattle?

Students will draw upon earlier weeks in the course to elucidate why \$15 is such a “sticky” idea, and apply the Kingdon policy window framework to show how the various “streams” had aligned to make it an ideal time for the minimum wage increase to be pursued.

Next, put students into small groups to conduct a stakeholder analysis and mobilization. Because of the many overlapping characters and interests within the case, this immediate focus on the major players will help students reset to remember the competing sides in the narrative.

After students put together a stakeholder analysis table examining where all the sides stand, bring the class back together and take ideas from students to assemble a common table.

This is a good jumping off point to begin asking what the motivations for Mayor Murray, labor, and business are.

Question: As Mayor Murray, what are some things you’re trying to achieve in the course of the minimum wage policy debate? What are the Mayor’s aims and priorities in the debate? Why?

Question: Why did Mayor Murray pursue a nontraditional process by bypassing the City Council?

Students will likely answer by mentioning the threat of a voter initiative war but may need additional prodding. From here, the instructor can lead a quick discussion on the ballot measure threat and the role of Councilmember Sawant and 15 Now.

Question: How did each of the three major players (Mayor Murray, business and labor) respond to the threat of a ballot initiative? Did it influence few, some, or most of the decisions they made throughout the case?

After discussion on the ballot measure threat has been well-established, transition the class to begin talking about the committee itself.

Question: What benefits or risks did the committee create for the Mayor?

Answers from students will reference the assigned venue shopping reading as students can compare the positives and negatives of the Mayor bypassing the City Council entirely to create the income inequality committee. Students will likely talk about the fact the Mayor has shifted sole responsibility away from him to share it with all the affected stakeholders – his success will be their success, or his failure will be their failure.

Now as the class approaches the end of the case and the decision point, discussion can turn to the essential question facing Mayor Murray.

Question: Should Mayor Murray keep the committee as is, reform the committee, or go his own way and abandon the process entirely?

Using the assigned readings on conflict assessment and resolution, students will provide their likely varied opinions about what the Mayor should do.

Question: If the Mayor chooses to continue with the committee, what are some things you would advise the Mayor to do in order to help the two sides reach a deal?

Epilogue

If time allows, the epilogue could be passed out in class for students to quickly read the resolution of the case.

Question: Do you think the business side made the right choice in choosing to compromise and support the plan on the table? Are you surprised they were unable to broker a better deal for their side?

Wrap Up

No matter which framework the case is taught from, there are some overarching themes and lessons that students will draw out of the case with help from the instructor. Primarily, the threat of the voter initiative war was such an important driver for nearly all actors in the case that it helped the Mayor's condensed and complicated process reach a compromise so quickly.

Additionally, the Mayor's focus on personal relationships and old-fashioned push-and-pull political negotiations – essentially locking his stakeholders in a room until they reached a deal – helped the committee rise above partisanship and division to find common ground. The Mayor's early decisions to lead from outside the room, and to take every proposal off the table except for a wage increase, also helped focus the discussions and ensure they didn't get off track.

Finally, students will also likely land on the theme of inevitability. It's easier to see with hindsight, but our position years after the 2014 negotiations helps us see that cities implementing higher minimum wages was an unstoppable force. The build-up of the income inequality movement out of Occupy Wall Street, the stickiness of the number "15," and courageous municipal leaders ended up not being an accident of history in Seattle – instead, Seattle was just the first of many cities and states to come.