

Bailey Wambold

Dr. Meiches / TPOLS 497 A

Winter Quarter

Final Reflective Paper

### **A Session on the Inside: Lessons from the Legislature**

For six years, I witnessed the inefficiencies and outright waste known to plague government operations, and upon leaving the Navy I was convinced I would never again hold a government job. However, it was not long into my pursuit of an Environmental Sustainability degree that I realized government operations and policies have enormous implications for a sustainable future in this era of climate change. With the ability to mandate or prohibit practices, public policy is a valuable tool for overcoming public inertia. Without changes to policy, statewide culture shifts are slow to occur and typically require a patchwork of community movements to gradually lead the way. Therefore, those who wish to quickly instigate widespread change and influence policy must understand the systems under which they operate. Despite Washington's label as a national leader in progressive environmental policies and practices, the state has far to go to become anywhere close to 'sustainable'. Adapting to our shifting climate necessitates a drastic shift in the everyday practices of most residents, and public policy holds significant power to bring about or deter that shift. Thus, as a dedicated sustainability advocate, I applied to become a legislative intern to familiarize myself with the systems controlling policy.

The Washington State Legislature is tasked with creating and altering public policy to serve the citizens they represent, as well as monitoring the operation of the executive branch. Washington has a bicameral legislature that operates on a biennium, with 105-day sessions in odd years and 60-day sessions in even years. The two chambers, the Senate and House of

Representatives, represent 49 districts that are each allotted one senator and two representatives. The House and Senate operate similarly, introducing bills to committees that hold public hearings and vote to progress or stymie prospective legislation. Upon making it through committee, bills are debated on the Floor in the chamber of origin and if the majority approves, they move on to repeat the process in the opposite chamber. Bills that survive a second legislative analysis ultimately arrive on the governor's desk to be signed into law, though remain subject to various vetoes. Finally, upon executive approval, policy can be enacted and the impetus for statewide change grows.

The legislative internship serves two primary purposes: to enhance the civic education of students and help elected officials stay connected with constituents. Specific duties vary by office, but all interns participate in weekly activities to broaden their understanding of state government operations. The activities offer valuable insight into the players and processes needed for a functioning government, and range from presentations by members of state agencies, special interest commissions, and government leadership, to extracurriculars (like the Yearbook and History teams), mock committee hearings and floor debates, and job shadows. Unlike the legislators we work for, interns must operate in a nonpartisan capacity, as well as uphold strict workplace standards, and those without a government background often experience a steep learning curve. However, it does not take long in the legislative environment to appreciate the importance of nonpartisan roles, especially when serving as an intern for offices whose ideologies greatly differ from one's own, as was my case.

For most of the 2023 legislative session, I was an intern for the Republican offices of Representative Klicker, from the 16th District, and Representative Barkis, from the 2nd. I worked mostly with the representatives' legislative assistants (LAs) learning about behind-the-

scenes administrative work. My primary task was to organize and respond to constituent emails, with one office assigning me a few low-priority constituent meetings. During my limited time with them, I witnessed the whirlwind schedule of a legislator, partook in the demanding work of maintaining constituent relationships, and learned about the values and concerns of my offices and their districts. I was glad for my prior military training in nonpartisan behavior and the life experiences it afforded me, because I was able to set aside my own prerogatives, embrace my role as an extension of my representatives, and appreciate the importance of making constituents feel represented by the people they elect.

### *Academic Summary*

I knew I had much to learn about state government when I applied, but upon entering the internship I soon realized I knew virtually nothing about legislative operations. However, the combination of regular civic education activities in Olympia and academic assignments for the university provided necessary guidance through the many processes and institutions shaping public policy. The assigned readings, while differing in scope, all reinforced three core ideas about government, and state governments in particular. First, state governments are uniquely formed by the dominant culture of the region and time. Second, although their power varies by state, political parties are an essential component to American democracy. And, finally, although generally held in poor regard by the public, interest groups and lobbyists are nearly as integral to policy making as the officials they solicit.

Although the 50 United States operate under one national constitution, every state has its own unique constitution and no two governments function the same. In both Squire and Hamm's (2005) *101 Chambers* and Donovan et al.'s (2011) *State and Local Politics*, the authors emphasize a need for thorough comparative analyses of state governments, and legislatures in

particular, for an effective study of state policy. States governments are structured to meet the needs of residents and are sculpted by the history, ideologies, geography, and economics of the regions they oversee. Unsurprisingly, variation in government characteristics (such as legislative structure and professionalization), processes, and institutional influences create vast differences in policy processes and outcomes across the nation (Donovan et al., 2011; Squire & Hamm, 2005). In *Governing the Evergreen State*, Clayton et al. (2018) describe Washington's status as one of few states where citizens can check government power and influence policy through the use of recalls, referendums, and initiatives, demonstrating the general lack of trust in elected officials, elites, and government operations that has characterized the state since its founding.

While their influence over the policy making process varies across time and space, political parties remain vital to the performance of American democracy (Squire & Hamm, 2005). Political parties in the U.S. largely follow the functional party model, where the primary goal is to achieve and maintain power, instead of the responsible party model, where members and mission remain ideologically consistent in the face of adversity. Parties provide citizens an opportunity to find community and overcome collective action barriers to policy mobilization, and help guide the structure of most elections and governing bodies. However, partisan identification rarely aligns exactly with political ideology, and constituents are seldom left feeling perfectly represented by their elected officials (Donovan et al., 2011). Despite an overt reliance on political parties for a functioning government, Clayton et al. (2018) identify Washingtonians' deep loyalty to their historic distrust of political institutions and populist attitude, and describe attempts to limit the power of the mainstream parties through the use of initiatives and movements led by special interest groups.

Regardless of the legislative resources available to research and create legislation, lobbyists and interest groups remain key players in the making of public policy. Donovan et al. (2011) define lobbying as the systematic effort to produce public policy aligned with the goals of the interest group advocating for change. Consisting of like-minded individuals with a common objective, interest groups range in size, mission, and wealth, but uniformly use both insider (direct interaction with policy makers) and outsider (raising constituent awareness and advocacy) tactics to influence legislation. Even with past controversies and a generally-negative public perception, lobbyists continue to magnify special interest voices in government and are an important source of information for lawmakers. Significantly, groups with the deepest pockets tend to enjoy the greatest access to legislators (Donovan et al., 2011). Unlike most of the country, Washington's lobby system is highly monitored and regulated, thanks to the Public Disclosure Commission, and the diversity of interest groups is broadly representative of the diverse needs of constituents (Clayton et al., 2018).

Due to a hectic schedule, interns can easily find themselves with only a myopic understanding of legislative processes, so the academic work helped students of all backgrounds leave the internship with a well-rounded understanding of the legislature. Interns were tasked with completing weekly journals and biweekly papers that required us to reflect on our legislative experience in light of the knowledge gained from assigned readings. Through a comparison of our legislative observations to those of distinguished scholars, students could quickly develop an appreciation for the intricate processes and power dynamics shaping public policy. In addition, routine reflections and analyses guided the identification of key themes I feel characterize the legislative process, or at least my experience of it. After ten weeks in the legislature, I have found that: 1) members of the public rarely have a firm grasp of legislative

activities and powers, 2) party loyalty and influence are the primary drivers of policy making, and 3) convincing someone of a mission's validity requires understanding their values, experience, and perspective, and ultimately connecting these to the advocate's end goal.

### *Theme One*

In my short time working for offices of state legislators, I quickly realized the vast majority of Washingtonians have a very narrow understanding of the lawmaking process, if any at all. The public perception of the abilities and activities of elected officials varies, but is frequently a far cry from reality. While sorting through thousands of constituent emails, I came across many popular misconceptions and discovered a widespread naiveté of the legislative hurdles facing elected officials as they work to represent their voters. There were countless niche misunderstandings to be found in constituents' correspondence, but a repeat few stood out and deserve discussion.

A common misconception of many citizens is that elected officials are wholly employed by the legislature and thus obligated to provide their undivided attention to the voters and taxpayers they serve. Undeniably, the Washington State Legislature is more professionalized than most other states, meaning members have notable time commitments to service, increased access to staff and facility resources, and greater financial compensation (Squire & Hamm, 2005). However, despite a base salary above the state median (RCW 43.03.013, 2021), many (if not most) legislators maintain their private careers in order to meet the financial demands of both their personal and public responsibilities. At least during the legislative session, members' busy schedules necessitate a flexibility in their private careers that few industries readily accommodate. It was therefore no surprise to learn many legislators were private business

owners, real estate agents, or lawyers with a relative degree of independent wealth and a seemingly endless list of priorities to balance.

Like quite a few members of the minority caucus, both Representative Barkis and Representative Klicker are real estate agents and business owners. In combination with their conservative values, this naturally makes them partial to legislation protecting economic growth and independent businesses. As members of the House Committee on Housing, my representatives debated many bills meant to address Washington's current housing shortage, and it often appeared the private careers provided guidance for decisions in the public. Keeping land and business owners, such as themselves and some vocal constituents, in mind, there were few instances where my members voted for bills that would increase financial burdens on these entities, despite such legislation sometimes receiving notable email support from voters.

However, it must be said that the representatives I served do a fair job prioritizing the needs of their districts' voters over the needs of their professions. As an example, Rep. Barkis was the first co-sponsor for a majority-sponsored bill meant to expand middle housing, which was opposed by much of the minority (including Rep. Klicker). Supporting Donovan et al.'s (2011) observation that partisan identification does not directly correlate to political ideology, the different needs and perspectives of different districts left me working for two Republicans on opposite sides of an issue. Although Rep. Barkis's 2nd District feels quite rural, encompassing much of Thurston and east Pierce counties, its proximity to hubs like Tacoma, Olympia, and Joint Base Lewis-McChord make addressing the housing crisis a top district priority. Rep. Klicker's 16th District, on the other hand, surrounds Walla Walla in rural Eastern Washington, where agriculture reigns supreme and increasing middle housing is much less of a priority, at least for the time being.

At the end of the day, any elected official's top priority is to effectively represent the people who placed them in power. Though taxpayers statewide furnish their salaries, legislators are beholden only to their districts, official duties, and occasional passion projects. The limited time and energy resources of legislators requires them to be judicious with the causes they champion; calls for action from non-constituents are almost uniformly ignored, no matter the volume of correspondence in support of or opposition to a bill. For example, if communications were not easily determined to be from within one of my members' districts, or from a pertinent stakeholder, I was instructed to immediately sort them into the abyss-like 'Mass Constituent Email' folder, where responses need not be considered.

With a past marked by numerous public controversies, lobbyists are understandably the target of significant constituent suspicion, if not outright disdain. I came across many communications accusing legislators of 'being in the pockets' of powerful lobby groups, and must admit my own well-nurtured distrust of the lobby system and its influence on lawmakers. However, though they reaffirmed my understanding that money is frequently a key to access, Clayton et al. (2018) and Squire and Hamm (2005) allayed some fears about the operations and transparency of the state's lobby scene. Compared to most states in the nation, Washington's lobby system is quite 'clean' and professionalized; I was reassured to learn about the establishment of the Public Disclosure Commission, the mandatory registration of most lobbyists, and the fact that state lawmakers are prohibited from accepting gifts from a single source exceeding a total value of \$50 per year. Additionally, during an intern activity with a panel of lobbyists, guest speakers emphasized the necessity of an honest reputation in their field and the fact that, whether we know it or not, every Washingtonian is represented by a lobbyist in some way.

Another example of a popular, yet inaccurate, belief is that legislators have sufficient office staff to adequately respond to every specific constituent request. During a day I covered the desk of Rep. Barkis's legislative assistant (LA), I answered a call from a concerned citizen wanting to know why retailers scan IDs to purchase alcohol. The individual requested I have one of the staff members research the applicable laws and regulations and reach out to him with answers, at which point I informed him that he was talking to the entirety of Rep. Barkis's staff for that week. Admittedly, prior to the internship, I was similarly under the impression that more people helped elected officials manage their official responsibilities, and was surprised to learn Representatives have only one full-time legislative assistant, and Senators typically have an LA and a Session Aide. Even with the occasional assistance from interns, legislators remain woefully understaffed to provide the individualized attention many constituents expect, especially when answerable to tens of thousands of people. With Squire and Hamm (2005) finding Washington's legislature to be more professionalized than most, I cannot imagine the overwhelming workload and unrealistic constituent expectations facing legislators in less-professionalized states.

Of the many constituent misunderstandings I witnessed, one of the most prevalent was the belief in legislators' ability to influence the progress of any legislation a voter inquires after. I sorted through hundreds of emails, most admittedly canned, that requested representatives "pull bills to the floor for a vote" or "schedule an executive hearing", demonstrating a notable ignorance of the basic lawmaking process. Though it is heartening to see constituents civically engaged and writing their representatives concerning issues they are passionate about, it is likely that many, if not most, of their requests will fall on deaf ears. Outside of a few key leadership positions, individual legislators have little, if any, impact on the progress of most legislation

outside the purview of their assigned committees. Even then, with my representatives being members of the significantly-outnumbered minority caucus, there is little such an individual can do to move legislation forward if the majority fails to lend support.

One final, if similar, constituent mistake is to believe elected lawmakers are aware of most bills making their way through the legislature and expect detailed responses describing a legislator's stance on niche issues. Because of the enormous time and energy commitments associated with their duties, elected officials have little bandwidth for 'additional' information and almost always defer to the caucus on issues outside the scope of their assigned committees. As an example, when constituents wrote to Representative Barkis, a member of the Housing and Transportation committees, about supporting the expansion of dry-needling acupuncture and I asked his opinion on the matter, I received a blank stare and was told to review the bill's supporters and create a response following the party trend. Of course, there are exceptions to this rule when bills outside legislators' interests can be connected to a widely-controversial issue and are deemed important by the caucus; in these cases, even though a legislator may personally care little about the bill, they often create a relatively detailed argument along party lines. With the current political atmosphere and 'majority superpower' in Olympia, the appearance of a 'strong, unified front' from the minority is important to make their constituents feel represented.

Through the simple tasks of sorting and responding to constituent emails I discovered widespread shortcomings in the civic education of many, if not most, Washington residents, myself included. It is therefore no wonder so many people become easily frustrated with elected officials and the outcomes they do or do not produce. With the many dynamic processes and important milestones to keep track of, fully understanding the legislative process requires significant effort and time commitments, naturally deterring many people. However, even a basic

comprehension of the legislative process at the state level can mitigate unnecessary resentment and misplaced frustration. Additionally, member offices would save precious man-hours otherwise spent correcting misconceptions. Prior to this internship, I knew little about the operation of state governments and their legislatures, which is rather astounding upon reflection; while not every student grows up to become a politician, all students grow up to become citizens. A healthy democracy is one where the electorate understands and actively participates in its operation. From my view, there is a desperate need to improve, or establish, civic education programs in public schools, ensuring students learn about the operations of both the state and federal government. As a nation founded on the principle of ‘government of the people, by the people, for the people’, the fact that ‘the people’ appear largely ill-informed raises questions about the future operations of our political systems, and American democracy as we know it.

### *Theme Two*

In the hyper-partisan environment of today, there are continual calls for people to ‘come together’ or ‘cross the aisle’ to protect the fitness of national and state governments. Events like the January 6th, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol serve as stark reminders that a healthy democracy requires open and fair communications and collaborations amongst the different ideologies overseeing the government. The most effective lawmakers are often those who are flexible and operate on a pivot to maximize power and policy productivity. However, I learned in the early days of my legislative internship that loyalty to party lines and philosophies is perhaps stronger than ever before and generally dictates a member’s official policy stance. Despite frequent pleas to focus on shared values and responsibilities across the parties, there remains a strong ‘us versus them’ mentality within the Washington State Legislature.

Although decidedly ‘blue’, Washington is a unique state with about a dozen of the 49 legislative districts encompassing over two-thirds of the geographic area. Especially east of the Cascade Mountain Range, rural districts are almost entirely represented by Republicans, while Democrats make-up nearly all the elected officials from around the Puget Sound. Unsurprisingly, the mainstream political parties in Washington take their cues from the national parties and generally adopt the same stance on core issues such as abortion, gun control, and tax reform. With both the executive and legislative branches of the state’s government controlled by Democrats, the caucus can essentially control the passage, or not, of bills in both the House and Senate. Therefore, the Republican minority caucus typically maintains a united front to demonstrate their efforts to ‘fight’ Democratic policies that go against the values of Republican constituents.

I was repeatedly taken aback when instructed to review a bill’s sponsors if I needed to guess a member’s official stance on the policy; I believed (and mostly still do) issues should first be well-understood, or at least fairly reviewed, before making any decisions or public statements about policy. It was a disheartening reminder of the contentious political environment, and indicative of the minority’s struggle to make their constituents feel heard. It seemed few noteworthy bills from this session were truly bipartisan, and those that were almost exclusively addressed topics not easily traced to a controversy occupying the public’s attention. There were many bills which I would have assumed to be noncontroversial and subject to bipartisan support, but upon closer inspection were quickly linked to a contentious political issue. An excellent example is the “Build Washington Families” bill, which proposed increasing insurance coverage to diagnose and treat infertility, to include In Vitro Fertilization (IVF).

Representative Barkis had received multiple emails requesting his support for the Build Washington Families bill, with many citing the growing popularity of IVF as the number of families facing infertility continues to rise. Upon my novice's review of the bill, nothing stood out to me as controversial; I have known plenty of conservatives who began their families with the assistance of IVF, so I could not understand the lack of support from the minority caucus. However, Rep. Barkis was quick to make clear that IVF could easily be linked to abortion because unused fertilized embryos are ultimately destroyed, and since the bill will not pass through his committee, he almost automatically follows the caucus line. After reading Squire and Hamm's (2005) and Donovan et al.'s (2011) descriptions of the different powers which shape policy making and state legislatures' reputation as fairly representative of their constituents, I found myself less critical of this behavior, but still put-off by its apparent necessity.

At the start of session, it could be difficult to gauge whether a bill was worthy of support based on the limited sponsors. One day, early in the internship, I was unable to reach my offices to ask about their official policy stance on a few niche topics for email responses. I eventually found myself reviewing topics with the minority caucus's policy specialist who is tasked with keeping track of the party's official policy stance and priorities. I was initially surprised to learn such a role existed, but quickly grew to appreciate its necessity in the current political environment. In addition, the caucuses have partisan policy advisors for specific topics in order to create a consistent source of topical information and guidance for elected officials to utilize when crafting an official opinion on various issues. Without learning about the increased professionalization of the Washington Legislature in both *101 Chambers* and *Governing the Evergreen State*, I would have felt these positions to be a superfluous use of limited state resources. However, Squire and Hamm (2005) and Clayton et al. (2018), in combination with my

own legislative experience, made it abundantly clear that these roles and offices are essential to the productivity of the lawmaking process.

Understandably, the information supplied by partisan policy specialists is hand-selected to align with the party's official stance and desired outcomes. Like mainstream Republicans across the nation, Washington's minority caucus offers opposition to virtually all legislation increasing regulation or taxes, and displays the popular hesitancy to acknowledge the severe realities of climate change. For example, the House Republican Caucus policy analysts distributed a bill brief containing talking points for opposition to a bill improving Washington's resiliency to climate change. The bill, HB 1181, would require an update to the goals of the Growth Management Act so that climate-related issues would be considered in community planning processes. Issues included common-sense actions like reducing greenhouse gas emissions, increasing green infrastructure and green space, reducing per-capita miles driven, and ensuring overburdened communities are considered in order to mitigate disparate impacts.

The bill brief for HB 1181 was littered with misleading or distracting information, and omitted key data. As a standout example, the brief claimed that the passage of the bill would lead to higher housing prices during a legitimate housing crisis. It gave the statistic that nearly 25 percent of the rise in housing costs could be attributed to Growth Management Act regulations, but there was no discussion of what caused the other 75 percent. Additionally, the brief appeared ambivalent about the legitimacy of climate change worries and implied current regulations and efforts were sufficient to address environmental concerns. It stated that the growing number of commuters in electric vehicles (EVs) offered the necessary carbon offset from transportation emissions to negate a need for lower emissions elsewhere. There was no empirical data on the offsets provided by EVs within the brief, and from my own observations there are still mostly

gas-powered cars on the roads. Also ignored was the well-established fact that greenhouse gas emissions need to be reduced to the greatest extent possible, in every sector, if we are to have a hope of mitigating catastrophic climate change in the increasingly-near future.

The ‘hot topic’ bills that received bipartisan support tend to cover themes important to both sides, such as improving public safety and protecting property. During the past biennium, the Democratic majority passed a law that increased restrictions on law enforcement’s ability to conduct vehicular pursuits. An increase in theft during the past couple years raised public outrage at the police’s ‘inability’ to hold offenders accountable, and multiple bills were introduced this session to restore police officers’ capacity to pursue. Most of the proposed legislation originated from the minority caucus and received little support because the majority considered the bills too lax on matters of police accountability. However, thanks to criminals’ indiscriminate targeting of Democrats and Republicans alike, one chamber passed a majority-sponsored bill allowing officers to pursue criminals by car under a broader range of circumstances. The passage was not unanimous and notable support and opposition could be found on both sides of the aisle, demonstrating a unique moment of bipartisanship in a highly partisan atmosphere.

Significantly, though, it was rare to have such a demonstration of in-party disagreement over minority-sponsored bills on controversial topics that made it to the chamber floor. Working for Republican offices, I heard constant complaints about the intractability of many of their ‘good’ bills which they felt were worthy of bipartisan support. There were many lectures about the session’s ‘bipartisan’ bills, and how they were majority bills at heart that had simply granted some concessions to the minority. One LA described the ‘typical’ process where an ‘extreme’ bill is introduced and forgotten during one session, but a more ‘practical’ version is introduced in

a subsequent session, at which point the minority acquiesce for the sake of legislative productivity. After reading Donovan et al. (2011) and Clayton et al. (2018) describe Washington's relatively competitive, if Democrat-controlled, legislative environment, I was surprised by what appears to be a distinct lack of competition under the current conditions.

Especially when issues are of little interest to legislators, it is nearly impossible to convince them to alter their stance from that of the official party line. Facts and figures rarely win-over skeptics and scare tactics are more likely to backfire than succeed, especially when asking someone to potentially 'betray' their caucus. An especially telling example, at least for me, was early in the internship when I was asked to write a House Floor Resolution in honor of Navy Day. As someone who refuses to glorify the military and constantly preaches about the poor treatment of active duty and veterans, I was excited for an opportunity to write a resolution highlighting the sacrifices and contributions of military members without promoting the military industrial complex, to the best of my ability.

I am highly ambivalent about my years of military service, but the one point of professional pride I maintain from that time is my contribution to the Navy's ongoing record of safe nuclear energy operations. I believe nuclear power offers an indispensable bridge to the future of truly renewable energies, and the public ignorance of its capabilities and safety is one of the largest hurdles slowing its expansion. The Navy's nuclear propulsion program is renowned for its intense training pipeline and severe working conditions and schedule, and Nukes, as they are colloquially known, are rarely given the recognition they very much deserve. Therefore, I tried to accomplish two additional, if personal, goals in my resolution: acknowledge the Navy's record of demonstrating the safety and viability of nuclear power in the Pacific Northwest, and give my overworked and underappreciated Nuke brethren some much-deserved affirmation.

Most of the resolution's phrasing was guided by that from previous years', but I was proud of the one truly unique line I had produced to honor the group that had been my family for over half a decade.

However, since the Navy Day resolution had been requested by the majority party, and since past incidents unfortunately turned nuclear power into a partisan issue, my commendation of the nuclear Navy was unceremoniously cut from the resolution upon caucus review. I was deeply frustrated to see the majority's stubborn refusal to publicly acknowledge the safety and practicality of nuclear power, especially at this critical point in transitioning the state's electricity infrastructure. When I came to my supervisor with my issues, they were sympathetic and tried to plead my case with the majority caucus. But, as one legislative assistant bluntly stated, "Democrats consider nuclear power to be a four-letter word," and the majority refused to budge on the Nuke shoutout, even after hearing of its significance to the author.

Yet, despite the lamentable outcome of the Navy Day resolution, the past two months have shown that the power of a personal connection to influence thinking, and ultimately behavior, should not be underestimated; especially when a moving backstory is involved. There were a number of occasions where my assumption about someone's stance was proven incorrect, and their 'surprising' opinion was always shaped by a personal connection. Representative Klicker, who at first glance could be described as the quintessential conservative politician, stands out as a distinct example. My interactions with him were occasionally an excellent illustration of Donovan et al.'s (2011) observation that partisan identification does not always perfectly match political ideology, which is generally shaped by a specific region's unique needs.

Most, if not all, of Representative Klicker's voting record aligns with that of his party's majority, leading me to presume he followed the mainstream on most subjects. However, with

his district seatmate being an openly-gay Republican and proponent of the Death with Dignity Act, Rep. Klicker held a softer opinion, and official stance, on a couple specific topics. For instance, in the current political atmosphere, the LGBTQ+ community faces growing hostility and many conservative anti-trans bills are making their way through various state legislatures. The proximity and shared values of Rep. Klicker and his seatmate led to Rep. Klicker “not supporting hate” and agreeing to oppose harmful anti-trans legislation. Additionally, the seatmate’s mother was a nurse whose experiences added legitimacy to her son’s advocacy for Death with Dignity, leaving Rep. Klicker less critical of the Act than much of his party and religion, the latter being his personal reason for opposition. Significantly, though, despite a few deviations from the official stance, there remains a clear, and at times seemingly blind, loyalty to party ideals within Washington’s legislature.

### *Theme Three*

When I applied for the internship, my primary intent was to learn about the legislative system and policy making. However, upon placement in offices whose ideologies differed significantly from my own, I adjusted my goal to include an education in their values, language, and behaviors. I decided to focus on the belief and behavior systems guiding policy as much as I did the actual legislative process, because policy only works if people actually practice what was passed. Thus, if I wish to enact environmentally sustainable change in communities, I must understand the personal priorities guiding people’s actions and determine how to motivate the necessary lifestyle shifts. After two months of observations and interactions, I found the common theme amongst legislative success stories to be the importance of learning, and respecting, different values and relating them to a bill’s ultimate goal as proof of the mission’s validity.

With lots of time spent sorting emails and sitting in my offices, I became familiar with common cares and concerns amongst Republicans. Through observing the frequent discussions and emails about popular topics like second amendment rights, the housing crisis, parental rights, and tax reform, I determined the core conservative complaints stemmed from perceived threats to individual freedoms or wealth, excessive government overreach, and deviations from traditional values or practices. It appears fear is a driving force behind constituents' decision to write legislators and demand action; in Republican communities especially, fear tends to be driven by religious ideologies and a belief that old ways are still the right ways to do most things, at least in my experience. Since Representative Barkis's 2nd District abuts my own (also conservative) 25th District, it is possible many of my neighbors share some of the same beliefs as constituents in the 2nd. I was, therefore, grateful for the exposure to some of the district's philosophies, and found myself identifying a few indications of a somewhat traditionalistic political culture, as described by Donovan et al. (2011).

Few constituents illustrated their concerns with the help of empirical data, and inboxes were mostly filled with canned emails, belittling remarks, and simple go/no-go statements about legislation. I felt the most compelling arguments were those with courteous, concise, and relevant information, who also demonstrated a strong ability to combine empirical and anecdotal evidence. In general, though, the rationales offered for different opinions and behaviors generally felt shallow and seemed to lack critical thinking, or at least a willingness to make connections between certain actions and outcomes. For example, many people wrote their representatives in support of greater funding for elderly and home care workers, but I also counted some of the same concerned citizens demanding no new taxes, showing a bit of cognitive dissonance about the systems provisioning the requested funding hike. Regardless of my feelings about the validity

of arguments offered by constituents, however, they all shared the need to be heard by their government and receive confirmation that representatives are fighting for their best interests.

Of course, what constituents believe to be their best interests are shaped by life experiences and political beliefs, and are therefore highly subjective. One person's 'best' interests do not always match those of their neighbors, and elected officials face the difficult challenge of simultaneously appeasing their district's majority while also promoting the welfare of all constituents. Unfortunately, the latter sometimes loses out to the former because of a few loud voices. I witnessed the power of interest groups and advocates to guide voting behavior, as described by Squire and Hamm (2005), Donovan et al. (2011), and Clayton et al. (2018), and came to appreciate their role as essential players in the legislative process. However, in my opinion, the authors understated the community impacts from deference to a somewhat small cohort of constituents, most often the wealthy, instead of the greater populace.

During my brief stint as an intern, there were multiple times where it seemed the greater district needs were peripheral to the desires of a few key interests. From the 'low priority' meetings I held with advocates, I got a sense for the political initiatives that my offices, or at least one of them, were unlikely to support. Notably, the issues these groups represented were legitimate, or at least growing, problems in the member's district. I met with advocates from houselessness and substance abuse recovery programs, various healthcare programs, and a couple different educational institutions. All described a significant need for increased resources to prepare for the future demands of their services, which are struggling as it is. Yet, when I offered my meeting notes and summaries, they were almost uniformly ignored and stored away to be forgotten; any requests for "more money" from my meetings were met with a chuckle and shake of the head to indicate, "No way." Taxes targeting the (ultra)wealthy being a primary

suggestion for raising state revenue to help fund such programs, the lack of support from my office should have been no surprise.

The minority caucus is quite steadfast in its dedication to not raising taxes, with the rationale being to protect seniors and working families. However, in the effort to protect constituents from so-called excessive government, they often fail to protect constituents from the harsh realities of 21<sup>st</sup>-century life. For example, advocates from Sea Mar testified to the growing Latinx population in the member's district and a dearth of available behavioral health care during a growing mental health crisis. As a result, they understandably requested additional funding for training and retaining the necessary personnel. I would have expected more consideration of the advocates' requests since the representative has a strong reputation as a second amendment supporter, and mental health care seems to be gaining ground in the minority caucus as a solution to the gun violence epidemic. There were a few occasions where I asked about root causes of problems, potential externalities, or the potential shortsightedness of policies and was surprised by the apparent novelty of my questions.

There often seems to be a willful ignorance of the things connecting and confounding various issues across both parties, as well as a common unwillingness to come together for discussion and collaboration. Squire and Hamm (2005) found higher levels of professionalization in legislatures led to a less collaborative environment and from my experience this appears to be true. Admittedly, I know extenuating circumstances contribute to the atmosphere, but improved access to policy staff would understandably reduce the need for cross-party cooperation when drafting legislation. From my observations and interactions, collaboration in the Washington State Legislature seems largely engineered in the majority's favor and far from genuine, at least when it comes to controversial issues. When it feels as though the game is already rigged, there

may be little incentive to expend the energy on candid conversation and establishing common ground and goals.

Significantly, though, every guest speaker to present during the internship exhorted the importance of finding shared values and experiences when trying to enact change, both in the legislature and in communities across the state. Commissioner of Public Lands, Hilary Franz, offered interns a snapshot of the immense puzzle that is balancing environmental and economic concerns, and cited finding shared values as the cornerstone of mutually-amenable solutions. She detailed her statewide campaign for office and the hometown concerns she heard and did her best to understand, respect, and address. Despite relative anonymity and a short campaign, Commissioner Franz won her first election; she has since won a second and is responsible for a much-needed reorganization of Washington's Department of Natural Resources, and she claims she owes it in large part to her ability to listen, empathize, and generate collaborative solutions.

During a tour at the Washington State Department of Ecology headquarters, interns had riveting conversations with a leader from the Office of Environmental Justice and a coordinator for the Climate Commitment Act (CCA) about how to motivate individuals to embrace change and facilitate action. Illustrating the occasional influence of small interest groups described by Donovan et al. (2011) and Clayton et al. (2018), we discussed the way some tiny grassroots groups opposing the 'haphazard' siting of renewable energy infrastructure elicited remarkable support within the legislature and from the public. With her background in private, nonprofit, and government operations and role in convincing Idahoan cattle ranchers to alter their practices for environmental reasons, the CCA coordinator was uniquely qualified to provide insight on changing communities and beyond. Like Commissioner Franz, the CCA coordinator spoke to the importance of finding a common goal or value related to the mission. She also left us with the

golden advice to aim for consensus over compromise, learn what is considered welcome or ‘hostile’ language on the topic, and to promote the idea of maintaining interests but shifting positions as more is learned.

### *Broader Reflections*

After going back on my oath and choosing to once again work for the government, I can safely say that public service is to be my future, though it will most likely be at the community level. My impression of the state legislature well matched the readings’ descriptions as more productive and representative than Congress, but its bureaucratic grindings are still too slow for my liking. I know the potential to enact significant change is possibly highest at the state level, but my selfish nature prefers to witness the tangible change at the community level. However, two months in Olympia during the 2023 legislative session taught me valuable lessons about both the policy making process and the powers and philosophies at play in the current political atmosphere.

Hearing the stories from small, ‘low priority’ advocacy groups during my few constituent meetings showed me that I am far better suited to be an advocate than legislator. I believe I would struggle to keep my conscience clear if I felt pressured to ignore so many valid requests for assistance. Additionally, both the meetings and emails offered testimony on the community impacts of the programs in question, and I was moved by the positive change they brought to so many lives. Through these interactions I had the realization that, just as I had learned in my previous policy classes that states operate as ‘laboratories’ for potential national policy, local policies and practices are important ‘test runs’ for prospective statewide legislation. Having made this connection, I find myself increasingly drawn to the idea of manning the frontlines of environmentally sustainable policy and practices at the local level.

Being a nonpartisan intern while a dizzying array of controversial bills fought through the state legislature reaffirmed a lesson learned both in the classroom and from society: Convincing a dissenter to change their opinion requires acknowledging the validity of their experiences and resulting perspectives before offering contrasting information, all with a fair amount of patience and grace. Of course, not every battle is worth fighting, and tongue biting is liable to be a common occurrence, but it should not deter the mission or a willingness to build relationships. Working for Republicans who do not look kindly on environmental regulations, often due to a lack of awareness in some areas, there were plenty of moments where I had to ignore my desire to offer a quick correction. However, there were also multiple occasions where I found myself drawing upon a combination of classes to produce a response to a ‘touchy’ environmental question that did not sound condescending or unintentionally condemn the questioner, and was typically well-received.

The internship was my first time back in the workforce since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and I was impressed with the interpersonal and communication skills I had developed since last being employed. I somehow became a source of ‘sage’ advice and the occasional mediator for a small group of interns, and was thankful for my life experience and emotional education to be able to assist where I could and remain above the fray when conversations got somewhat ‘spicy’. Although I did not hold a leadership position, I was again reminded that some of the most effective and inspiring leaders are those who lead by example and consistently practice humility in their endeavors, and I did my best to emulate this philosophy throughout my time in Olympia. Additionally, it was interesting to be one of the very few interns without a strong law or political science background, and I enjoyed the practice of offering quick lessons on various environmental or sustainability topics, or as I like to say, “Planting the seeds.”

Conversely, when my relative deficiency in political know-how repeatedly left me lost or confused, I was thankful for the impressive knowledge and patient lessons offered by my peers to aid my understanding. However, these many teaching and learning opportunities, often on seemingly simple or intuitive topics, were also heavy reminders of the poor education or misinformation so many receive, and the need for a drastic change to public education programs around these critical subjects.

### *Concluding Remarks*

The eleven weeks of my internship have without a doubt shaped my future; witnessing the slow progress of policy at the state level reinforced my resolve to center my focus at the community level in order to be a part of the tangible change I desire. The fact that community-generated solutions frequently come to be used in more widespread (state) applications is deeply motivating, and validates my belief in the importance of ‘small’ steps when aspiring to big change. While I had somewhat expected this result, I could not have expected the impact on my worldview and hope for the future instigated by my fellow interns. As I was leaving my twenties, I regularly fell into the trap of expecting little from the generation behind me. However, turning thirty surrounded by extremely driven and talented individuals, with an average age about eight years my junior, was a refreshing wake-up call to the growing number of young people who truly want to help address the many crises confronting the 21st century.

The cohort of interns had a broad array of backgrounds and personal missions. While most are on a path, mentally and physically, towards a specific goal, I was struck by the almost universal willingness to engage with new concepts and challenge their prescribed thinking. Many of the highly-driven individuals I have met in life were far less accommodating and flexible about alternative views, so it was a shock to work with such incredibly intelligent, competent,

and motivated people willing to regularly engage with new information. While the intern cohort is an exceedingly curated sample of young people, it nevertheless appears there is an expanding culture of learning, acceptance, and personal growth amongst younger generations. It is easy to become disheartened in the study and practice of addressing society's environmental sustainability, but this internship and my exposure to the shifting ideologies of upcoming generations renewed my faith in the mission's importance. Though there is no 'fixing' the climate crisis, there are improvements to be made in virtually every sector to reduce harm. My time amongst Washington's legislative interns has shown me that plenty of people and future leaders want to do the right thing and are ready to learn, yet simply need the proper guidance.

## References

- Clayton, C.W., Donovan, T., & Lovrich, N.P. (2018). *Governing the evergreen state: Political life in Washington*. Washington State University Press.
- Donavan, T., Mooney, C.Z., & Smith, D.A. (2011). *State and local politics: Institutions and reform*. Cengage Learning.
- [HB 1181] Washington State Climate Response Resiliency Act, HB 1181, Washington State 2023 Legislative Session. (2023). <https://app.leg.wa.gov/billsummary?BillNumber=1181&Year=2023&Initiative=false>
- [RCW 43.03.013] Salaries of Members of the Legislature, Revised Code of Washington § 43.03.013 (2021). <https://apps.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=43.03.013>
- Squire, P., & Hamm, K.E. (2005). *101 chambers: Congress, state legislatures, and the future of legislative studies*. Ohio State University Press.