

Negotiating Action Civics: Multi-layered Conflict Management in the 2018 Massachusetts Civic Education Law

Research Overview

This study uses the multi-layered conflict management framework to examine the legislative process behind the 2018 Massachusetts Civic Education Law. Based on interviews with eight stakeholders, this study explores how the Action Civics mandate was negotiated amidst political polarization, offering insights into implementing justice-oriented practices in a polarizing world.

Purpose of Study

Structural inequalities in civic education have long been a subject of academic and social concern, particularly regarding the civic empowerment gap (Levinson, 2012). To address these disparities, recent educational initiatives have sought to provide all students with social justice-oriented practices. However, implementing such reforms faces significant challenges in politically polarized environments.

The 2018 Massachusetts “Act to Promote and Enhance Civic Engagement” mandates student-led civics projects for all public secondary school students, representing a noteworthy reform. This study analyzes factors contributing to this mandate’s realization by conceptualizing policy-making as strategic multiparty negotiation (Crump & Glendon, 2003). The study investigates six dimensions: (1) internal adjustments within the drafting team, (2) consensus-building within the Democratic Party, (3) inter-organizational coordination with the bureaucracy, (4) bipartisan negotiations, (5) legislative-executive relations, and (6) the final synthesis of political compromise.

Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative case study methodology. Document analysis was conducted on legislative drafts, amendments, and sessions of the Massachusetts General Court. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight key stakeholders. Data collection was conducted during a research residency at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, which facilitated interviews with: (1) Harriette Chandler (Former Senate President), (2) Andres Vargas (Representative), (3) Alice Peisch (House Education Chair), (4) Bruce Tarr (Senate Minority Leader, Republican), (5) James Peyser (Former Secretary of Education), (6) a former senior official at the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), (7) Arielle Jennings (Former director, Generation Citizen), and (8) a former school principal in Worcester with close professional ties to Senator Chandler.

Thematic analysis was informed by the multiparty negotiation paradigm (Crump & Glendon, 2003). Specifically, the five building blocks—primary party, coalitional, non-cooperative, third-party, and support relations—were utilized as an analytical grid. By mapping the six dimensions of conflict management onto these categories, the study reveals the strategic logic employed to navigate multi-layered tensions.

Results

The analysis indicates that the mandate's passage was facilitated by deliberate adjustments across relational layers:

- 1. Intra-party and Internal Coordination (Drafting Team):** The team rebranded Action Civics as “student-led civics projects” to maintain the underlying principle while adopting a nomenclature less likely to provoke ideological resistance.
- 2. Coalitional and Intra-party Negotiation (Democratic Party):** Addressing concerns from teachers' unions regarding new mandates, the team incorporated evidence-based policy designs, such as linking the mandate to professional

development and ensuring educators would not be held personally liable for non-compliance.

3. Support and Inter-organizational Alignment (Legislature and Bureaucracy):

Sponsors collaborated with DESE to align the mandate with the curriculum framework, ensuring the bureaucracy functioned as a supportive partner during implementation.

4. Primary Party Engagement (Bipartisan): Senator Chandler engaged Senator Tarr, a moderate Republican who feared indoctrination. Because the bill's origin was Action Civics, Tarr remained deeply involved to ensure objectivity. Revisions included: (a) removing "strategic action" in the article, (b) adding structured learning time requirements, and (c) limiting projects to the History and Social Science framework.

5. Third-party Mediation (Legislative-Executive): Senator Tarr served as a critical link between the Democratic sponsors and Secretary Peyser to prevent an escalation of conflict. He argued for the mandate's objectivity based on his amendments (e.g., structured learning time and framework alignment). By coordinating with the Baker-Peyser administration, he prevented a gubernatorial veto and ensured projects would not become one-sided advocacy platforms.

6. Consensus Through Synthesis: This culminated in the "non-partisanship" clause, protecting "freedom of political belief" by granting students the right to opt out and providing alternatives. This created space for conservative-oriented projects, mitigating concerns about liberal dominance while remaining acceptable to Democrats focusing on student rights.

Discussion

The findings suggest that forming social justice-oriented civic policies in contested contexts depends on: maintaining core practice principles while prioritizing educators' perspectives, and adopting strategic nomenclature to mitigate backlash. Robust inter-actor

collaboration is essential to prevent practices from becoming a mere shell. Ensuring objectivity and knowledge instruction, combined with rhetoric that resonates with conservative values, is critical for policy resilience. This case study contributes to the discourse on strategic co-creation of educational policy amidst societal divisions.

Keywords: civic education, Action Civics, conflict management, multiparty negotiation, social justice

References

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