

“Back off Bezos”: Amazon Money Fails to Flip Seattle City Council

By Dani Kritter, J.D. Candidate, 2021 | November 7th, 2019

Amazon spent \$1.6 million to make the Seattle City Council more business-friendly, but the failed foray into local politics may cost the company far more in the long run.

In 2015, Amazon and its employees donated about [\\$130,000](#) to Seattle City Council candidates. In 2019, that total increased tenfold, with [\\$1 million](#) donated just weeks before election day. The money flowed to a local business advocacy organization that spent funds to support pro-business—and therefore pro-Amazon—candidates. The advocacy group spent the most to defeat [Kshama Sawant](#), a fierce critic of Amazon. And while early results indicate that the efforts successfully ousted Sawant, there is no sign that Amazon will come away with a landslide victory. On the contrary, the donations have landed Amazon’s feud with Seattle in the national spotlight and may prove to heighten discomfort with big tech.

Though Amazon takes pride in its Seattle roots, tensions have grown between the company and its hometown in recent years. In [2018](#), the City Council proposed a per-employee tax designed to make the largest corporations contribute to funding affordable housing and homeless services in the city. Locally based giants, including Amazon, Starbucks, and Microsoft, joined together to fund a campaign against the “Tax on Jobs.” Amazon threatened to freeze its planned construction and halt its growth in the city if the tax were imposed. The backlash was so significant that the City Council repealed the tax just a month after passing it. The fear of a revived “Amazon tax” likely drove Amazon to spend big in 2019 to reshape the Council in its favor.

However, that plan may have drastically backfired. The local election spending has landed Amazon in the [national spotlight](#) and may prove to be a flashpoint in the big tech and income inequality debate. Amazon and its supporters argue that the company has brought jobs and infrastructure to Seattle, making it a global tech center. Others, however, point to Amazon as the [root of Seattle’s problems](#): the more than [50,000 employees](#) at the company’s home base exacerbate the city’s soaring housing costs and homelessness crisis. Amazon’s effort to tilt the City Council so as to avoid a tax that would fund solutions to these problems undermines the company’s commitment to its community. The Seattle election saga will likely heighten



skepticism of big tech in politics and may galvanize supporters of the policies that Amazon sought to defeat.