



Seattle Democracy Vouchers

Analysis of the Program's Impact

Seattle's Democracy Voucher Program (DVP), launched in 2017 after voters passed Initiative 122, is a pioneering public campaign financing system. Created to counteract growing political inequality and to give everyday residents a stronger voice in local elections, the DVP provides Seattle residents with four \$25 vouchers to allocate to participating candidates of their choice. The program's key goals include expanding voter participation, promoting diverse candidates, reducing the influence of big money in politics, and enhancing the transparency and accountability of city elections.

Since its inception, the DVP has had a transformative impact on Seattle's electoral landscape, creating measurable and positive changes in key areas:

1. **Expanding Political Participation:** The program has significantly increased the number and diversity of donors participating in local elections.
2. **Increasing Voter Turnout and Civic Engagement:** The DVP has directly boosted voter turnout, particularly among low-turnout and first-time voters, enhancing overall engagement with the political process.
3. **Diversifying the Candidate Pool and Promoting Competitive Elections:** By lowering financial barriers, the program has encouraged a wider and more diverse range of candidates to run for office, leading to more competitive races.
4. **Reducing the Influence of Big Money:** The program has diminished the role of large, out-of-city contributions and corporate money in Seattle's elections, shifting power back to everyday residents.
5. **High Satisfaction and Public Support:** Surveys reveal widespread approval for the DVP among both voters and candidates, with strong public support for the renewal of the program's funding.

These achievements directly align with the original goals set by advocates when they launched the campaign and underscore the program's critical role in creating a more equitable, transparent, and inclusive political system in Seattle. This memo explores the measurable benefits, outcomes, and successes of the Democracy Voucher Program, supported by detailed data and research from academic studies, voter surveys, and independent evaluations.

1. Expanding Political Participation

One of the primary goals of the Democracy Voucher Program is to expand the number and diversity of individuals who participate in elections. The program has been highly successful in achieving this goal, with a marked increase in small donors, higher engagement from underrepresented groups, and an overall increase in political participation.

Key Findings:

- **Fifefold Increase in Small Donors:** Before the DVP in 2015, only 1.3% of Seattle residents contributed to City Council campaigns.¹ By 2021, this number had increased nearly fivefold, with 7.6% of the city's voting-age population participating in the program.²

¹ <https://www.sightline.org/2015/07/22/who-funds-seattles-political-candidates/>

² <https://www.seattle.gov/documents/Departments/EthicsElections/DemocracyVoucher/Program%20Data/Reports/2021%20Seattle%20Democracy%20Voucher%20Report.pdf>

- **First-Time and Low-Turnout Voters:** The program has engaged many first-time political donors. In 2017, 88% of voucher users had never contributed to a local campaign before.³ Additionally, Win/Win Network's analysis shows that voters who used vouchers in 2017 and 2019 participated in an average of three more elections than those who did not use vouchers.
- **Diverse Demographics:** The DVP significantly expanded participation among lower-income residents and people of color. By 2021, voucher users closely mirrored Seattle's overall population in terms of income, with the lowest-income residents slightly overrepresented. The racial diversity of participants also improved, with 15% of voucher users identifying as people of color, compared to only 12% of cash contributors.⁴

2. Increasing Voter Turnout and Civic Engagement

Research indicates that the Democracy Voucher Program has had a positive impact on voter turnout, particularly among low-propensity voters and communities that typically have lower rates of political participation.

Key Findings:

- **Increased Voter Turnout:** A study from UC Santa Barbara found that the DVP increased voter turnout by 4.9 percentage points in Seattle elections.⁵ This increase is particularly significant in local elections, which traditionally see lower turnout compared to national or statewide races.
- **Enhanced Civic Engagement:** The program has encouraged deeper civic engagement by motivating candidates to reach out to a broader base of constituents. This is evident in the shift toward grassroots campaigning, with candidates relying more on small-dollar donations and direct voter outreach. The program's design incentivizes candidates to engage in door-to-door canvassing and personal conversations with residents, further increasing community involvement.⁶

3. Diversifying the Candidate Pool and Promoting Competitive Elections

Another significant success of the DVP is its role in democratizing the candidate pool and making elections more competitive. By reducing the financial barriers to entry, the program has enabled a more diverse group of candidates to run for office.

Key Findings:

- **Increased Candidate Participation:** Between 2017 and 2021, 77% of primary election candidates and over 80% of general election candidates chose to participate in the Democracy Voucher Program.⁶ In 2023, 100% of primary and general election candidates chose to participate in the program. This high rate of candidate participation underscores the program's success in making elections more accessible.
- **Diversity in Candidates:** The program has led to more women, people of color, and younger candidates running for office. A University of Washington study found that there was an 86% increase in the number of candidates per race, with approximately 3 additional candidates per race following the implementation of the program.⁷ Many first-time candidates, particularly those from historically marginalized

³ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1iD3Vzo2dDeHB2vQqfEOVmBc0BV2vkFfa/view?usp=sharing>

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<https://www.seattle.gov/documents/Departments/EthicsElections/DemocracyVoucher/Program%20Data/Reports/2021%20Seattle%20Democracy%20Voucher%20Report.pdf>

⁵ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/coep.12625>

⁶ <https://www.seattle.gov/democracyvoucher/program-data/internal-program-reports->

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https://www.seattle.gov/documents/Departments/EthicsElections/DemocracyVoucher/Biennial%20Reports/UW_Seattle_Voucher_Final.pdf

communities, indicated that the availability of Democracy Vouchers was a decisive factor in their decision to run.

- **More Competitive Races:** The program has also contributed to making Seattle elections more competitive. There has been a 36% reduction in the number of incumbents running for re-election, compared to pre-program years, which has opened the field for new challengers.⁸

4. Reducing the Influence of Big Money

One of the core objectives of the Democracy Voucher Program is to reduce the influence of large donors and corporate money in Seattle's municipal elections. The program has succeeded in shifting the balance of power away from wealthy interests and toward ordinary residents.

Key Findings:

- **Reduction in Large Contributions:** A study by UC Santa Barbara found that, after the introduction of Democracy Vouchers, dollars from contributions under \$100 increased by 156%, while dollars from large contributions over \$250 decreased by 93%.⁹ This shift indicates that campaigns are now more reliant on small-dollar contributions from everyday residents.
- **Decline in Out-of-City Contributions:** Out-of-city contributions to city council district races dropped by 84% from 2015 to 2023. For mayoral races, out-of-city contributions dropped by 75% between 2015 and 2021, and for at-large city council races, there was a 79% reduction.¹⁰ This data highlights the program's effectiveness in reducing the influence of non-local donors.
- **Transparency and Accountability:** The DVP includes strict rules to ensure transparency and accountability in campaign finance. Candidates who accept vouchers must adhere to spending limits and participate in public debates, which increases transparency in elections and holds candidates accountable to voters rather than large donors.

5. High Satisfaction and Public Support for the Program

The Democracy Voucher Program has garnered widespread support from both voters and candidates, with high satisfaction rates across multiple surveys.

Key Findings:

- **Voter Satisfaction:** A 2023 survey found that 90% of voucher users expressed satisfaction with the program, with 53% stating they were extremely satisfied¹¹. This reflects the broad approval of the program among participants.
- **Support for Levy Renewal:** With the program's current funding set to expire in 2025, there is strong support for renewing the property tax levy that funds the DVP. Two-thirds (66%) of Seattle voters would likely support the renewal of the levy, highlighting the program's importance to the community¹².

Setting a National Example

Seattle's Democracy Voucher Program has become a model for other cities and states looking to reform their campaign finance systems. Inspired by Seattle's success, other cities like Oakland, CA have passed similar public

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https://www.seattle.gov/documents/Departments/EthicsElections/DemocracyVoucher/Biennial%20Reports/UW_Seattle_Voucher_Final.pdf

⁹ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/coep.12625>

¹⁰ <https://web6.seattle.gov/ethics/elections/archive.aspx?cycle=2024>

¹¹ https://drive.google.com/file/d/1wCqd7ep_dSuW2tO230hxFmf6WyMYjb8z/view?usp=sharing

¹² https://drive.google.com/file/d/1wCqd7ep_dSuW2tO230hxFmf6WyMYjb8z/view?usp=sharing

financing programs. Oakland's Measure W, which establishes a "Democracy Dollars" program, was approved by 74% of voters in 2022 and is expected to launch in 2026^[OBJ].

Seattle's Democracy Voucher Program has fundamentally transformed the city's political landscape by increasing civic engagement, diversifying both the candidate pool and donor base, and reducing the influence of big money in elections. The program has set a new standard for transparency and accountability in local politics, while promoting equitable participation across socioeconomic and racial demographics. As Seattle looks toward the renewal of the program in 2025, the Democracy Voucher Program stands as a vital tool for fostering a more inclusive and representative democracy.