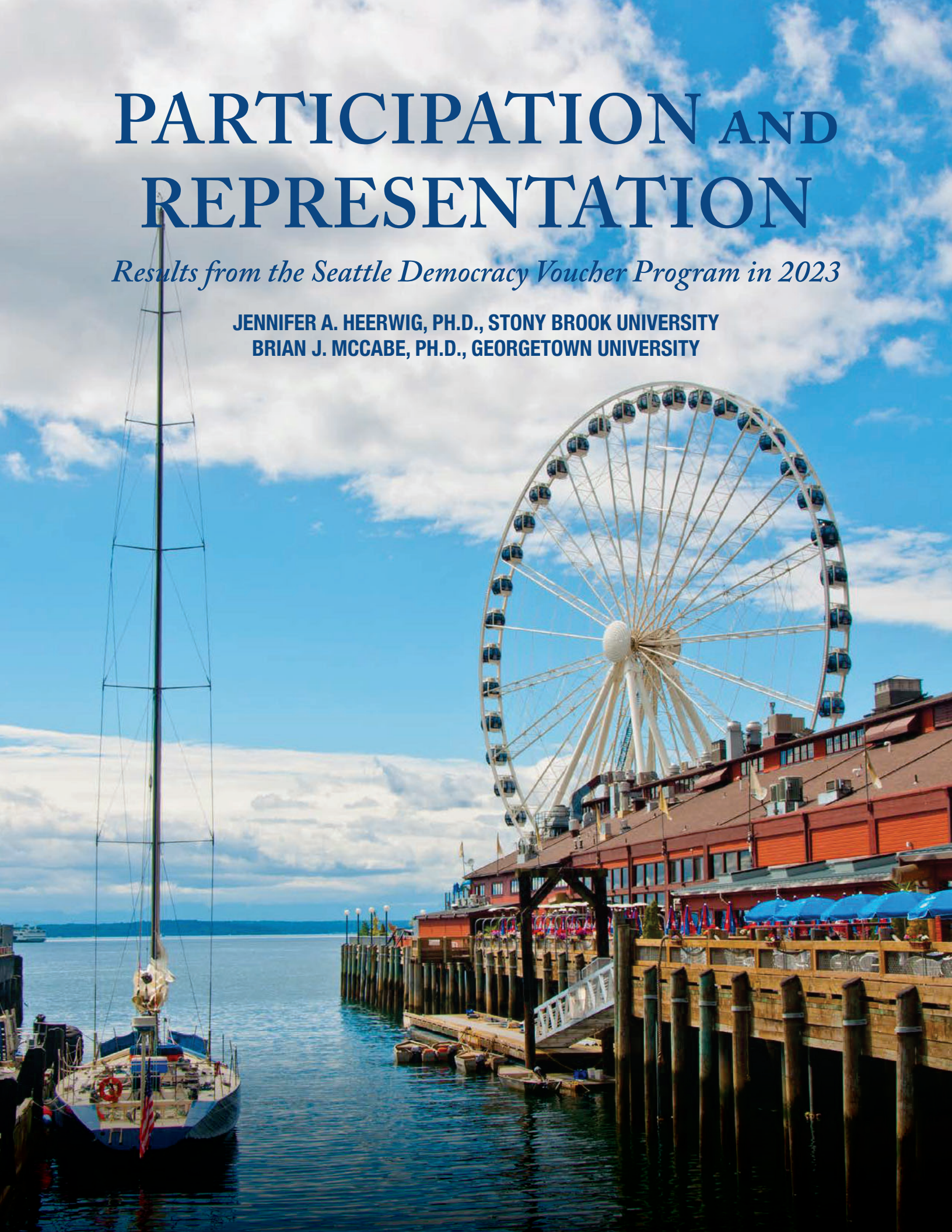
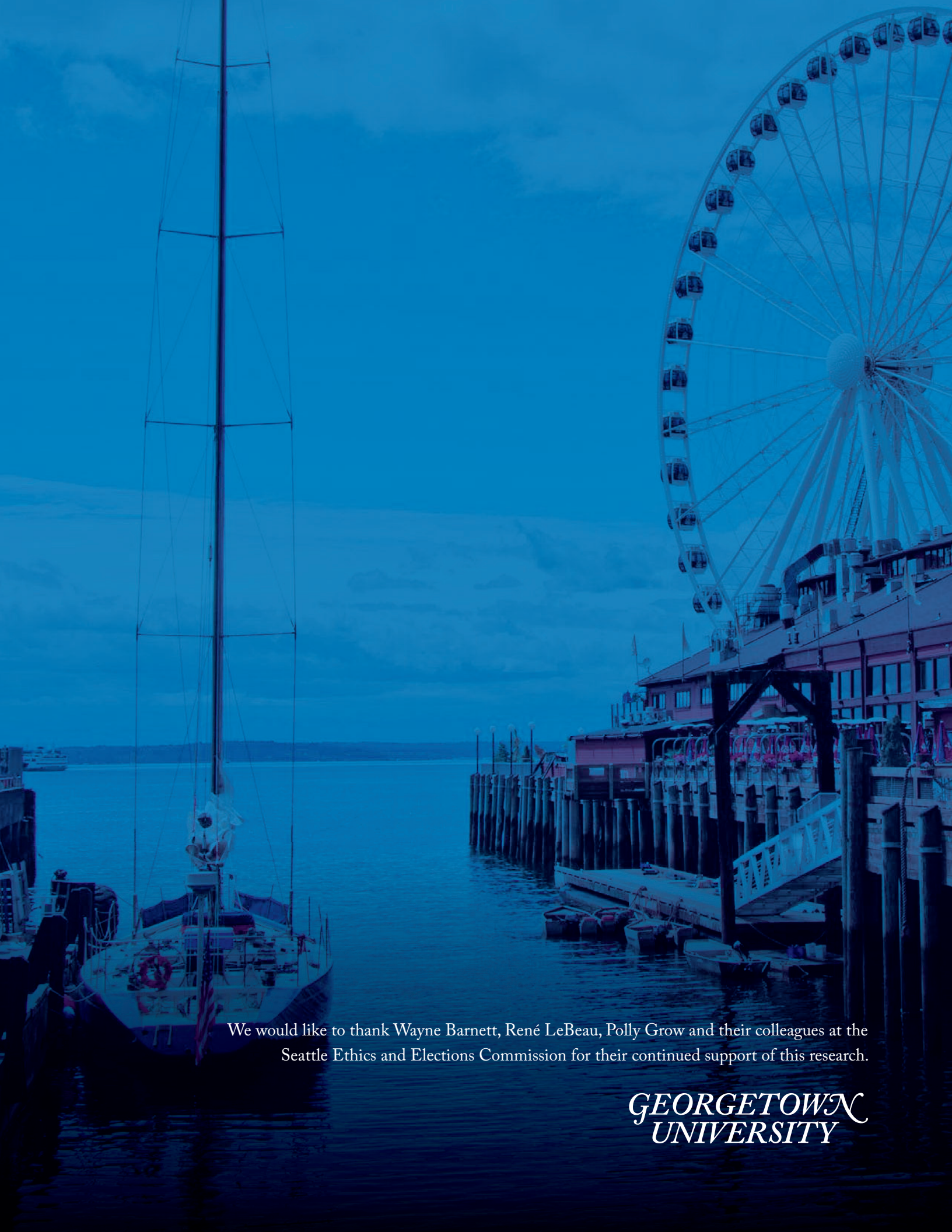


PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION

Results from the Seattle Democracy Voucher Program in 2023

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Executive Summary

- In 2023, the Democracy Voucher program completed its fourth election cycle. This was the second election cycle in which Seattle residents could use their vouchers in districted City Council elections.
- Participation in the program fell significantly compared to both the most recent election in 2021 and the last election with districted City Council races in 2019. Overall, 30,649 Seattle residents participated in the program, resulting in a participation rate of 4.72 percent.
- Participation declined across all demographic groups, including people of color, women, and low-income residents. The most significant declines, however, were among young voters. In 2023, the participation rate for individuals under 40 years old fell to 3.4 percent—their lowest level since the program's inaugural year.
- Despite declines in participation, the demographic makeup of participants in the program was similar to that of voters in the 2023 election. Lower-income residents, people of color, and women were similarly represented among voucher users and 2023 voters.
- The program continued to attract a more diverse and representative pool of participants relative to traditional cash donors. Women, people of color, lower-income residents, and younger Seattle residents were better represented in the Democracy Voucher program than among cash donors.

Background

In 2015, voters in Seattle passed an initiative creating the Seattle Democracy Voucher program. Under the rules of the program, residents of Seattle each receive four \$25 vouchers to allocate to the candidates of their choice in local elections. Candidates running for Mayor, City Attorney, and City Council are eligible to participate in the program. Candidates qualify for the program by collecting signatures and qualifying donations from donors throughout the city.

The 2023 election cycle was the fourth for the Democracy Voucher program and the second where participants could use their vouchers to support candidates in Seattle’s seven districted City Council races. In total, 45 candidates vied for those seven positions in the primary election. Forty-two of these 45 candidates (93 percent) pledged to participate in the program, with 31 ultimately qualifying. Under the rules of Seattle’s electoral system, the top two vote-getters in the primaries competed in the general election. All fourteen candidates in the general election participated in the Democracy Voucher program.

The program continues to change and adapt with each election cycle. For the 2023 election, the Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission (SEEC) made several changes to improve outreach and tighten voucher collection rules. The SEEC worked closely with fifteen community-based organizations to inform the public about the program, including organizations in underserved communities. Along with the agency’s own outreach efforts, more than 64,000 residents received direct information about the program. The

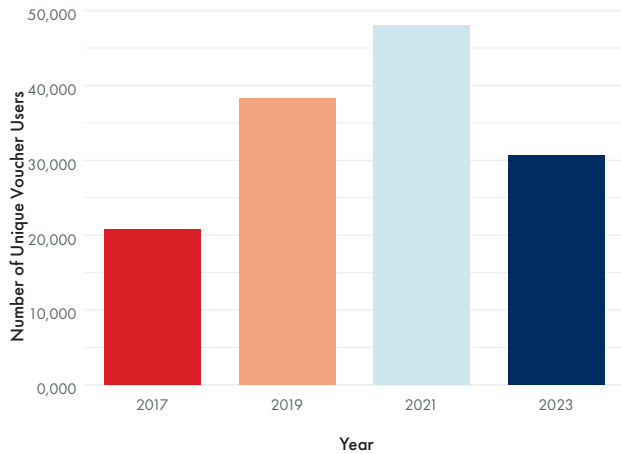
Commission also implemented new rules regarding voucher collection in response to public feedback.

After four election cycles, the Democracy Voucher program has solidified as part of the political process in Seattle. Among current elected officials who were eligible to use the program when they ran for office, ten of the current eleven officials participated.

Section 1: Voucher Usage

After steadily increasing over the previous two election cycles, participation in the Democracy Voucher program dropped significantly in 2023. In the previous districted City Council elections held in 2019, more than 38,000 unique Seattleites participated in the program—nearly double the number of participants from the inaugural cycle in 2017. By 2021, with the first mayoral election using the Democracy Voucher program, participation climbed to more than 48,000 residents. However, in 2023, participation declined precipitously, with only 30,649 Seattle residents returning their vouchers—a decline of 36 percent from the previous election cycle in 2021 and 20 percent from the previous districted Council elections in 2019. These changes are reported in *Figure 1*.

Figure 1: Total Voucher Users, 2017 - 2023

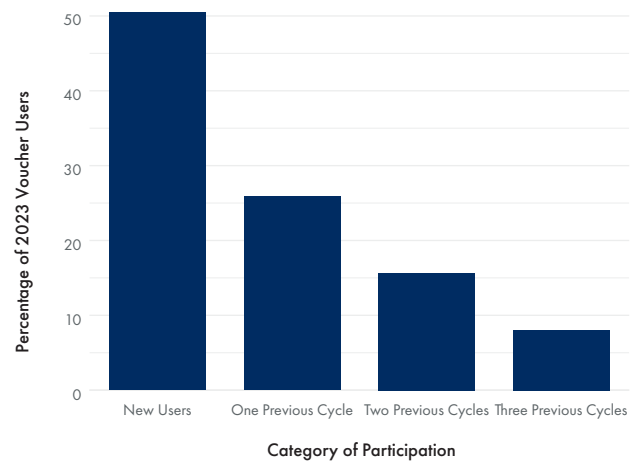


The decline in participation among Seattleites resulted in a significantly lower participation rate compared to previous election cycles. In 2021, 7.59 percent of the voting-age population in Seattle used their Democracy Vouchers, compared to 6.76 percent in 2019. In 2023, the participation rate fell to 4.72 percent.¹

Participants in the Democracy Voucher program tend to be one-time users rather than regular participants. In 2021, 77 percent of Seattleites who had participated in any of the three election cycles did so only once, rather than using vouchers in two or all three of the elections. This suggested that the program was introducing a new set of donors each election cycle, thereby refreshing the donor pool rather than entrenching a core set of repeat participants. The story of a refreshed donor pool emerged in 2023, as well. *Figure 2* graphs the percentage of the 2023 voucher pool that had not participated in the program before, as well as the percentage that had given a voucher in one or more previous cycles. More than half of voucher users in 2023 were first-time users who

had not previously participated in the 2017, 2019, or 2021 election cycles. While the overall number of participants fell compared to previous election cycles, the 2023 election brought an additional 15,457 Seattle residents into the program who had never participated before. (*Figure 2*)

Figure 2: Single Election Voucher Users, 2023

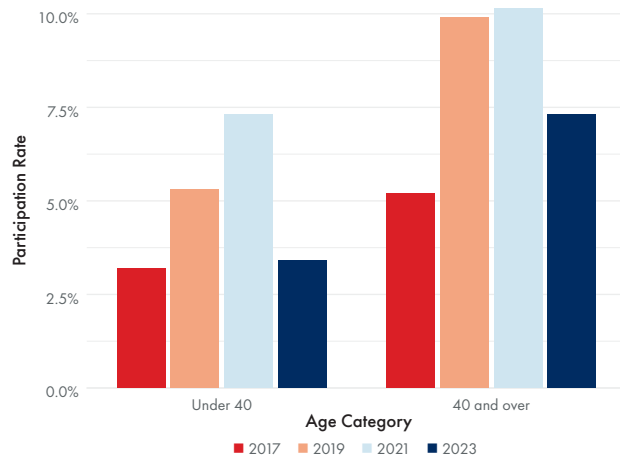


Section 2: Participation Rates

As overall participation in the Democracy Voucher program declined, participation across all sociodemographic groups declined as well. Broadly speaking, existing patterns of participation—with high-income residents participating at higher rates than low-income residents, white residents participating at higher rates than people of color, and older Seattleites participating at higher rates than younger Seattleites—persisted in the 2023 election cycle.

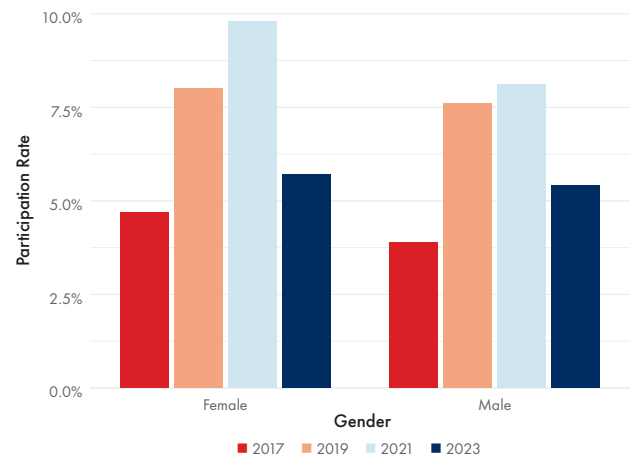
¹ We utilize the voting-age population (n=649,253) from the 2022 1-year estimates of the American Community Survey to calculate the eligible population of voucher users. Available: <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDP1Y2022.DP05?g=160XX00US5363000&cy=2022>

Figure 3: Participation Rates by Age Category, 2017-2023



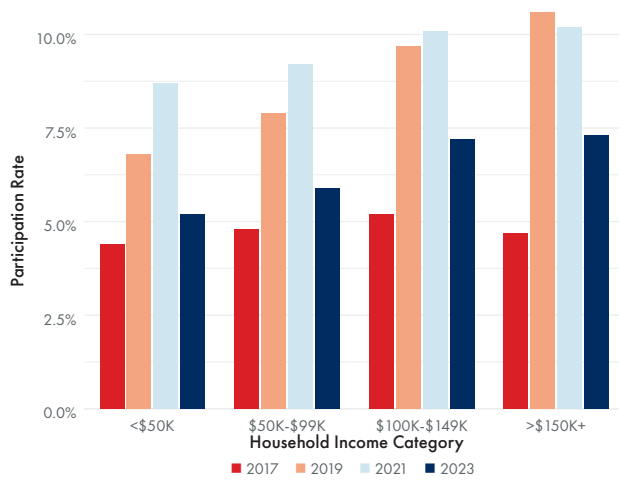
Although participation in the Democracy Voucher Program fell among all age groups, the decline was starkest among the youngest residents. In 2021, about 7.3 percent of Seattle residents under 40 years old participated in the program; in 2019, about 5.3 percent of younger residents participated. But in 2023, only about 3.4 percent participated—a rate closer to the inaugural year of the program. While participation also fell among Seattleites over 40, the decline was less pronounced. In 2021, 10.2 percent of Seattle residents over 40 returned their vouchers, compared to 9.9 percent in 2019; in 2023, the participation rate fell to about 7.3 percent. (*Figure 3*)

Figure 4: Participation Rate by Gender, 2017-2023



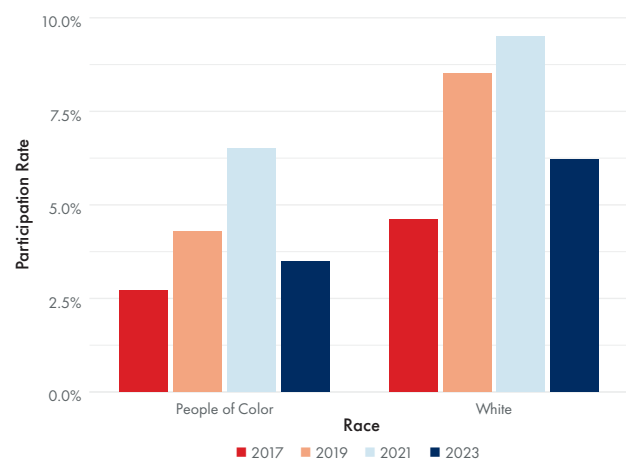
In previous election cycles, female Seattleites participated in the Democracy Voucher program at higher rates than males. For example, in 2021, participation among women climbed to 9.8 percent, compared to 8.1 percent for men. In 2019, 8 percent of women compared to 7.6 percent of men returned vouchers. In the 2023 election cycle, participation declined for both groups, resulting in near parity in the participation rate by gender. About 5.7 percent of women participated in the program, compared to about 5.4 percent of men. (*Figure 4*)

Figure 5: Participation Rate by Household Income, 2017-2023



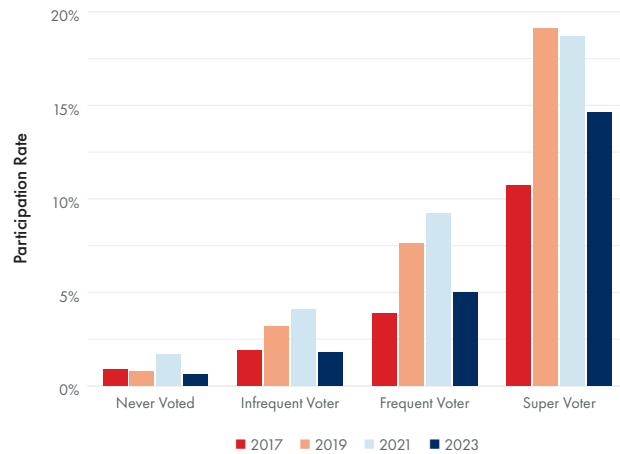
Consistent with patterns of voter turnout, high-income residents have historically participated in the Democracy Voucher program at higher rates than low-income residents. In 2023, these patterns across income groups held, although participation declined for all income categories relative to 2021 and 2019. Participation in the program was highest among higher-income categories. In 2023, 7.3 percent of Seattleites with household incomes of \$150,000 or more allocated a voucher, while only 5.2 percent of those with incomes less than \$50,000 per year did so. (Figure 5)

Figure 6: Participation Rate by Race, 2017-2023



Participation in the Democracy Voucher program declined across racial groups, although it declined more steeply among people of color than among white Seattleites. White residents continued to participate at higher rates than people of color. About 6.2 percent of white Seattleites participated in the program in 2023, compared to only about 3.5 percent of non-white Seattleites. Participation was down from historic highs in the previous election cycle, when nearly 9.5 percent of white residents and 6.5 percent of non-white residents participated in the program. Participation among non-white residents also declined from the last districted council races in 2019, when 4.3 percent of non-white residents participated. (Figure 6)

Figure 7: Participation Rate by Frequency of Past Voting, 2017-2023

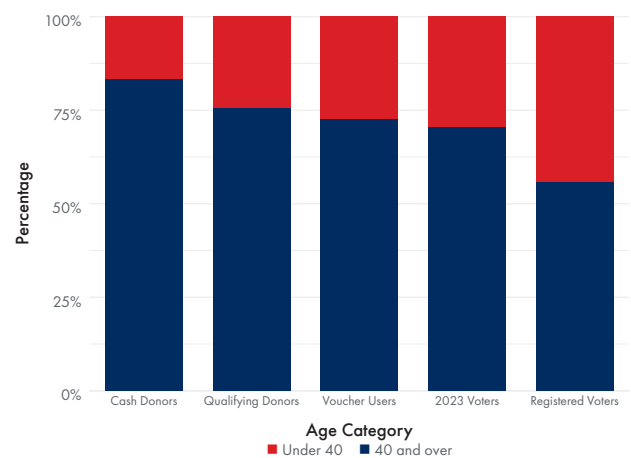


Seattle residents who are more inclined to participate in local politics by voting in elections were also more likely to participate in the Democracy Voucher program. Even so, participation among all groups was down from previous years. Among super voters—those in the top quintile for voting frequency within Washington state—participation in the program fell from 18.7 percent in the last election cycle to 14.6 percent in 2023. Among frequent voters, participation in the program fell from 9.2 percent to 5 percent during the same period. Among infrequent voters in the city, defined as the bottom two quintiles of voting frequency, only 1.8 percent participated in the Democracy Voucher program, maintaining their anemic participation in local politics. While the patterns of participation are consistent with previous election cycles, participation was down across all groups of voters. (*Figure 7*)

Section 3: Demographic Profiles

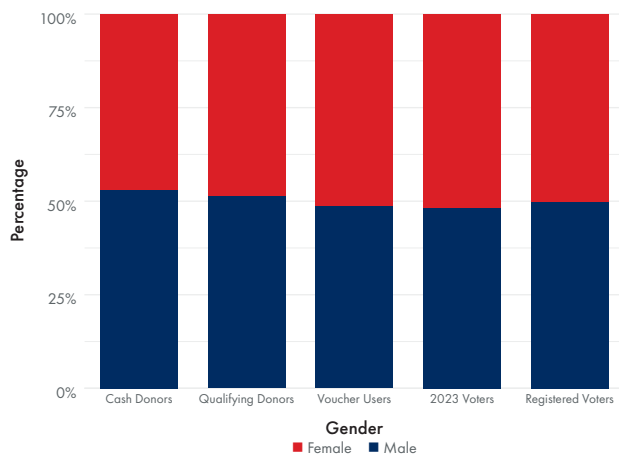
In this section, we compare the demographic composition of participants engaging in five types of participation in local elections: registering to vote, voting in the 2023 election, making a cash donation, giving a small-dollar qualifying contribution to a participating Democracy Voucher candidate, and returning a Democracy Voucher. The primary comparison in each chart compares active voters who voted in the 2023 general election with Democracy Voucher users to identify whether program participants are broadly representative of active voters in local elections. In most cases, the analysis suggests that they are representative despite the steep declines in program participation in 2023. We also make comparisons with cash donors in local elections to identify where certain groups of participants, including younger Seattleites and people of color, were underrepresented in making cash donations compared to their participation in the Democracy Voucher program.

Figure 8: Age Comparisons for Donors, Voucher Users, and Voters



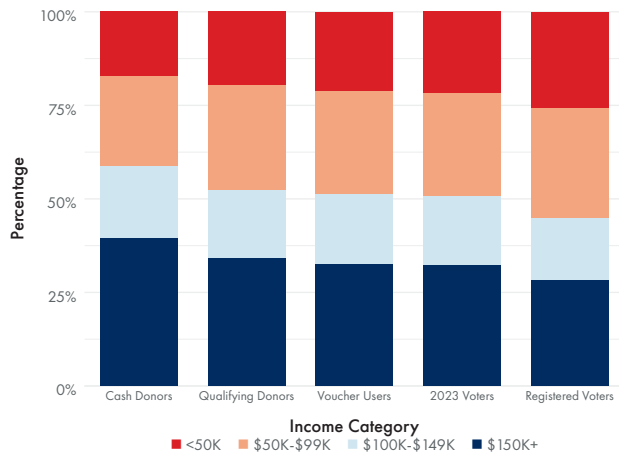
Compared to their participation as voters in the 2023 election, residents under 40 years old make up a slightly smaller share of Democracy Voucher users than active voters. About 29.5 percent of active voters in 2023 are under 40, but only 27.4 percent of voucher users are under 40 years old. However, these residents are better represented in the Democracy Voucher program relative to their participation in the pool of cash donors. Only 16.7 percent of cash donors are under 40 years old. On the other hand, older residents are slightly overrepresented in the pool of Democracy Voucher users compared to their participation as active voters, and they are significantly overrepresented in the pool of cash donors. (Figure 8)

Figure 9: Gender Comparisons for Donors, Voucher Users, and Voters



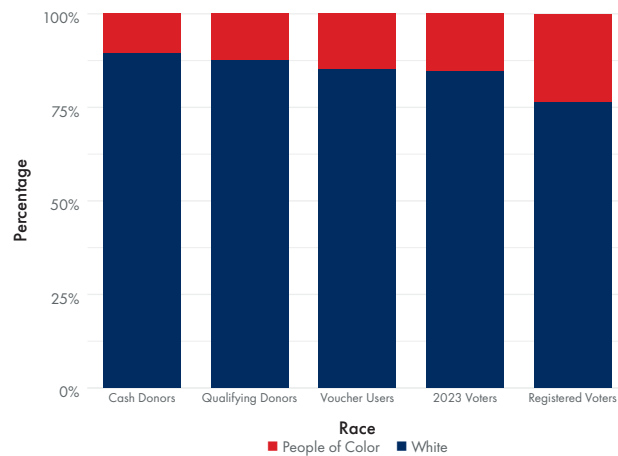
Women comprise 51.8 percent of active voters and 51.4 percent of voucher users. However, they make up only 47.0 percent of cash donors, suggesting that they are overrepresented in the Democracy Voucher program relative to their participation as cash donors. By contrast, men make up 53 percent of cash donors, but only 48.6 percent of Democracy Voucher users. (Figure 9)

Figure 10: Income Comparisons for Donors, Voucher Users, and Voters



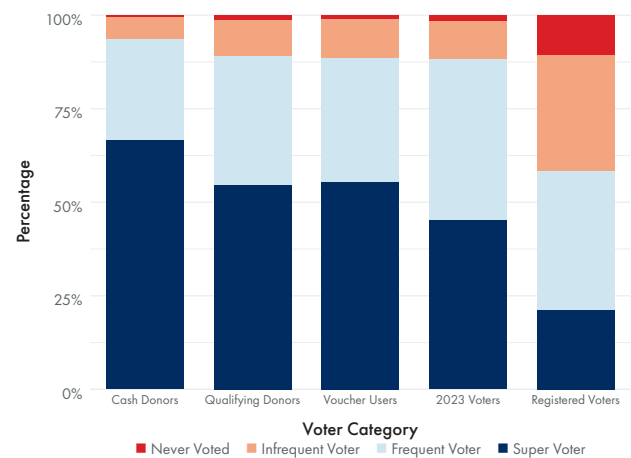
Across income groups, participation in the Democracy Voucher program broadly mirrors participation among active voters. The highest earners in Seattle comprise about 32.3 percent of active voters in the local election. They are similarly represented in the Democracy Voucher program, with 32.4 percent of participants from this income group. These high-income Seattleites make up 39.3 percent of cash donors in the election, suggesting they are overrepresented among cash donors compared to the pool of Democracy Voucher users. Similarly, low-income residents earning \$50,000 or less are about as likely to participate in the Democracy Voucher program as they are to vote in the 2023 election. They comprise 21.7 percent of active voters and about 21.3 percent of voucher users. However, these low-income residents are significantly underrepresented in the pool of cash donors, comprising only 17.2 percent of cash donors. (Figure 10)

Figure 11: Race Comparisons for Donors, Voucher Users, and Voters



There is little difference by race between the pool of active voters and Democracy Voucher users. In 2023, about 15.3 percent of active voters were people of color, and 84.7 percent of active voters were white. In the Democracy Voucher program, 15 percent of participants were people of color, and the remaining 85 percent were white, suggesting parity across these two types of participation. Notably, people of color comprise only 10.7 percent of cash donors in local elections, suggesting that while people of color are well-represented in the Democracy Voucher program, they are underrepresented among cash donors relative to their participation in elections. (Figure 11)

Figure 12: Frequency of Past Voting Comparisons for Donors, Voucher Users, and Voters



Compared to their participation as active voters, super voters are slightly overrepresented in the pool of Democracy Voucher users, and frequent voters are slightly underrepresented. Super voters comprised 45.1 percent of voters in the 2023 election, but they made up 55.5 percent of the pool of Democracy Voucher users. On the other hand, frequent voters made up 33.3 percent of Democracy Voucher users but were 43.1 percent of active voters. Infrequent voters were about as likely to vote in the 2023 local elections as they were to allocate a Democracy Voucher. In 2023, these voters comprised about 10.3 percent of active voters and 10.2 percent of Democracy Voucher users. (Figure 12)

Conclusion

With the close of the 2023 elections, Seattle residents have now had the opportunity to participate in the Democracy Voucher program in four local election cycles. Participation climbed during the first three election cycles before declining in the most recent one. Part of this decline can be attributed to the nature of the districted council races, which tend to attract less attention and generate less enthusiasm than the citywide contests for mayor and at-large council seats. Still, participation declined even compared to the last districted council races. Although we cannot definitively say why participation dropped relative to 2019, we speculate that a combination of increased independent expenditures, fewer participating candidates overall, and political fatigue in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic may have contributed to the decline. Even so, more than 30,000 residents participated in the program, half of whom were new participants.

The 2023 election cycle also saw some changes that widened gaps in program participation. While participation fell across all groups, it declined most sharply among participants under the age of 40, suggesting that a general lack of enthusiasm among the young electorate translated into declining rates of engagement. In previous cycles, participation among this underrepresented group was one of the program's most important contributions.

Despite the lower participation rates in the 2023 cycle, our sociodemographic analyses show that the Democracy Voucher program continues to reduce representational inequalities between traditional cash donors and voters. Across measures, including income, race, gender, and past participation, Democracy Voucher users are more representative of all Seattle voters than cash donors. This pattern suggests that—even though participation declined sharply in 2023—the program continues to make progress in diversifying the donor pool.



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