

2/5/2024

Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission

City of Seattle
P.O. Box 94729
Seattle, WA 98124

Dear Commissioners,

We, the undersigned organizations and members of the People Powered Elections Washington coalition, urge you to consider vital reforms to strengthen and modernize Seattle's Democracy Voucher program.

We understand that the Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission (SEEC) is currently reviewing potential changes to Seattle's Democracy Voucher Program, a crucial initiative that has significantly contributed to keeping local elections competitive by reducing the influence of wealthy donors and special interests, amplifying the voices of everyday people as small donors, and fostering increased civic participation. As stakeholders deeply invested in the democratic process, we wish to express our collective support for a series of important reforms that we believe will further enhance the program's effectiveness and impact.

Our coalition advocates for the following reforms to Seattle's Democracy Voucher Program:

Increase the Maximum Campaign Valuation (MCV) for publicly-financed candidates to keep elections competitive

A successful public financing system demands that participating candidates have the capacity to compete with privately-funded counterparts. If the MCV is too low, publicly-financed candidates may feel overly constrained by the program, as they won't be able to raise enough money to mount a viable campaign. Considering the rising cost of inflation, a moderate increase to the MCV is a critical step toward ensuring the continued success and popularity of the Democracy Voucher Program so that candidates are able to run for office without an overreliance on wealthy and corporate interests.

Reevaluate the qualification metrics required for candidates to participate in the program

When the qualification threshold for the Democracy Voucher Program was first created, campaign leaders knew these figures would likely need to be updated once the city was able to evaluate the impact of the program. One change we believe should be implemented is the elimination of the signature threshold for candidate qualification. Given the reporting requirements that accompany the small donations necessary to qualify for the program, it now seems redundant to also mandate the collection of signatures. We believe that eliminating this requirement will streamline the qualification process for candidates, reduce unnecessary signature verification costs incurred by the

city, and otherwise have minimal impact on the implementation of the Democracy Voucher Program.

We also believe the commission should review other qualification metrics, including the minimum donations required for candidates to participate in the program. With the significant increase in the number of participating candidates running for local office in recent years, it is clear democracy vouchers are effectively providing community leaders with a means to mount a competitive race using public funds. As the city's voting population continues to grow, it may be necessary to adjust the number of small donations required for candidates to qualify for the program. Periodic recalibration will ensure that the program is able to balance candidate accessibility and competitiveness, while safeguarding public trust amidst the evolving demographics of the city. This becomes particularly crucial as candidates vie for democracy vouchers from a finite public fund.

Soften the prohibition of voucher collection by paid staff

The Democracy Voucher Program currently prohibits any paid staff from collecting vouchers. While we recognize the intention behind this decision, we believe this policy to be overly stringent, as it prevents core campaign staff from participating in the most basic function of this program. Campaign managers and other staff are able to collect private money for their candidates but are barred from collecting vouchers, which places publicly-financed candidates at a disadvantage in terms of how their staff can be utilized in the field. We strongly encourage the commission to explore alternative options to allow some number of paid staff to engage in voucher collection.

Provide early funding to qualified, participating candidates

One piece of feedback we have received from several candidates is that the time delay between collecting vouchers and receiving funds from the city is simply too long. Most campaigns end up going into debt immediately upon launching, as startup and hiring costs are increasingly expensive. Such debt can hinder a campaign's prospects, as candidates end up struggling to invest in future outreach while also managing to retroactively pay for startup costs. Early funds may be provided via a small grant, which can be awarded to candidates immediately upon qualification for the program. Another option is to offer qualified candidates an advance on the voucher money they are expected to receive. Additional solutions may be feasible, and we encourage the commission to explore these improvements to the program.

Add a "memo" line for users to communicate their affiliation or reason for donating to a particular candidate

The core goal of the Democracy Voucher Program is to increase the engagement between candidates and constituents so that our elected leaders effectively represent the interests of the communities they serve. Adding a memo line on vouchers would allow residents to communicate directly with their preferred candidates by listing relevant affiliations, geographic connections or key issues that they hope they will champion while

in office. As part of the public record, these notes will also allow observers to examine dominant themes and priorities among voucher users, which may be useful in the evaluation of the program's impact.

These proposed reforms reflect our commitment to refining the Democracy Voucher Program, making it more robust, equitable, and reflective of the diverse voices within our community. By implementing these changes, we firmly believe that the program will continue to play a pivotal role in nurturing a vibrant and inclusive democracy in Seattle. We kindly request that the SEEC carefully consider our proposals during your deliberations and work collaboratively with us to ensure the continued success of Seattle's Democracy Voucher Program.

Thank you for your dedication to upholding the integrity of our local democratic processes. We look forward to the opportunity to contribute further to this important dialogue and stand ready to support the SEEC in any way we can.

Signed,

Community Organizations

Asian Pacific Islander Americans for Civic Empowerment (APACE)

Faith Action Network

FairVote Washington

Fix Democracy First

Fuse Washington

League of Women Voters Seattle King County

OneAmerica

Progreso: Latino Progress

Public Citizen

RepresentUs

Rhizome

SEIU6 Property Services NW

Transit Riders Union

Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle

Washington Bus

Washington CAN

Washington Community Alliance

Washington Conservation Action

Washington for Equitable Representation

Working Washington

Individuals

Estevan Muñoz-Howard, Community Activist with People Powered Elections Washington

Mike O'Brien, Former Seattle City Councilmember

Rory O'Sullivan, Community Activist with FairVote Washington