



### Expanding Participation in Municipal Elections: Assessing the Impact of Seattle’s Democracy Voucher Program

#### Executive Summary

In 2015, voters in Seattle approved the Democracy Voucher program to radically reshape the way municipal elections are funded. By providing vouchers to every registered voter in the city, the program aimed to broaden the donor pool and diversify contributors in local elections. Seattle is the first city in the United States to implement this type of public financing program.

Launched in the 2017 election, the Democracy Voucher initiative successfully increased the number of residents participating in the campaign finance system. In total, 20,727 residents in Seattle returned their vouchers – more than twice the number that made a cash contribution to a local political candidate. About four percent of Seattle residents participated in the program.

While the Democracy Voucher initiative increased participation in the campaign finance system, some groups of Seattle residents were more likely to return their vouchers than others. Wealthy, white and older residents were more likely to participate in the

program than low-income, younger and non-white residents. Individuals who were already politically engaged, as measured by previous voting behavior, were more likely to return their vouchers than registered voters who rarely voted in elections. These differential rates of return by race, income, age and political engagement create opportunities for program improvements in 2019.

The Democracy Voucher program is beginning to move the contributor pool in a more egalitarian, representative direction. Compared to cash contributors in the 2017 election, participants in the Democracy Voucher program were generally more representative of the Seattle electorate. Low- and moderate-income residents comprise a substantially larger share of voucher users than cash donors. Voucher users are more likely than cash donors to come from the poorest neighborhoods in the city. Residents under 30 years old make up a larger share of voucher users than cash donors.

#### Who Participated in the Democracy Voucher Program?

The Democracy Voucher program substantially increased the number of Seattle residents participating in the campaign finance system. The number of Seattle residents making a cash contribution in the municipal elections rose from 8,234 in 2013 to 10,297 in 2017. Of these contributors in 2017, 4,960 contributed to a candidate for City Attorney or City Council. By contrast, 20,727 people in Seattle returned their vouchers. [Figure 1]

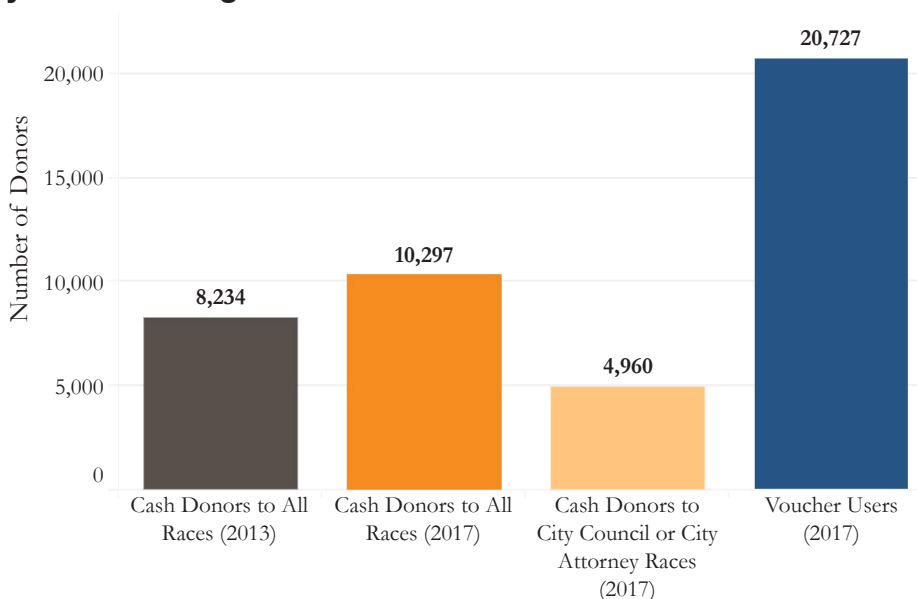


Figure 1: Total Number of Cash Donors and Voucher Users

While the absolute number of Seattle residents participating in the local campaign finance system increased, participants still represent only a small fraction of the electorate. About 4 percent of eligible individuals returned their vouchers.

Participation in the Democracy Voucher program varied substantially across demographic groups. Older residents in Seattle were three times more likely to participate than younger residents. More than 6 percent of Seattle residents over the age of 60 returned their vouchers, but only 2 percent of residents between the ages of 18-29 did so. [Figure 2]

Whites were almost twice as likely to return their voucher as blacks. More than 4 percent of white Seattle residents returned their voucher but only 2.4 percent of black residents participated. In fact, whites were substantially more likely to return their voucher than every other racial and ethnic group in the city. [Figure 3]

High-income residents in Seattle participated in the Democracy Voucher program at a substantially higher rate than low-income residents. More than 5 percent of individuals with an annual income above \$75,000 participated in the Democracy Voucher program, but only about 2 percent of individuals with an annual income below \$30,000 participated in the program. [Figure 4]

Finally, citizens who were already engaged in the political system by regularly voting in general elections were much more likely to return their vouchers than those who voted infrequently or not at all. Among registered voters who voted in every election for which they were registered, more than 8 percent returned their Democracy Vouchers. On the other hand, among registered voters who voted in fewer than half of the elections for which they were eligible to vote, only about 1 percent participated in the Democracy Vouchers program. [Figure 5]

While the Democracy Voucher program increased the number of people participating in the local campaign finance system, the rate of participation varied widely across groups. Although the program pushed participation in the local campaign finance system to an all-time high in Seattle, historically under-represented groups were less likely to participate in the program. These findings create an opportunity for community stakeholders to further engage under-represented groups to increase their participation in the Democracy Voucher program.

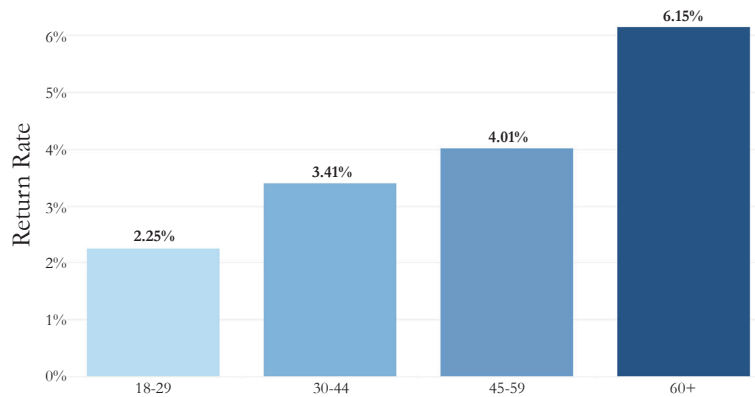


Figure 2: Democracy Voucher Return Rate, by Age

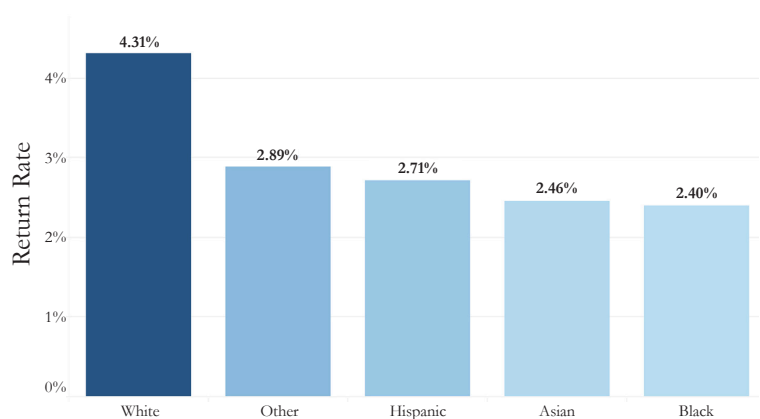


Figure 3: Democracy Voucher Return Rate, by Race

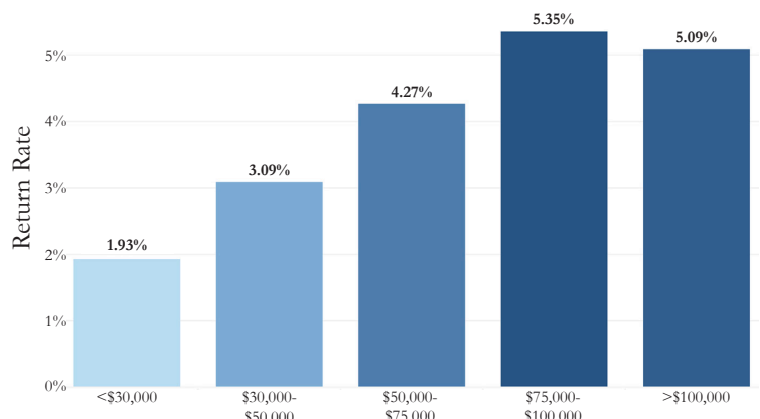


Figure 4: Democracy Voucher Return Rate, by Income

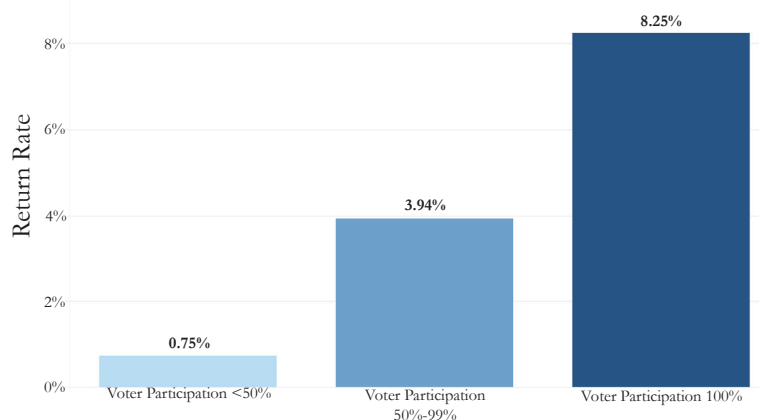


Figure 5: Democracy Voucher Return Rate, by Political Participation

## How Do Participants in the Democracy Voucher Program Differ from Cash Donors?

The Democracy Voucher program aimed to diversify the pool of campaign contributors in local elections. In previous election cycles, candidates overwhelmingly relied on a small number of high-dollar donors concentrated in a handful of wealthy neighborhoods. By providing vouchers to every registered voter in Seattle, the Democracy Voucher program endeavored to create a pool of donors that looked more like the pool of eligible voters. This section compares the profile of participants in the Democracy Voucher program (“voucher users”) with the profile of cash contributors in the 2017 election (“cash donors”).

Older residents in Seattle make up a larger share of participants in the Democracy Voucher program than they do in the pool of cash donors. In fact, 36

percent of voucher users were 60 years old or older compared to slightly more than 33 percent of cash donors. Young donors (under the age of 30) make up a larger share of donors in the voucher program than in the pool of cash donors. [Figure 6]

Although the Democracy Voucher program aimed to diversify the racial composition of the donor pool, white residents comprise a disproportionate share of both voucher users and cash contributors. While 79 percent of registered voters in Seattle are white, whites comprise 86 percent of participants in the Democracy Voucher program and 87 percent of cash contributors. In fact, the racial composition of voucher users is nearly identical to the composition of cash donors. [Figure 7]

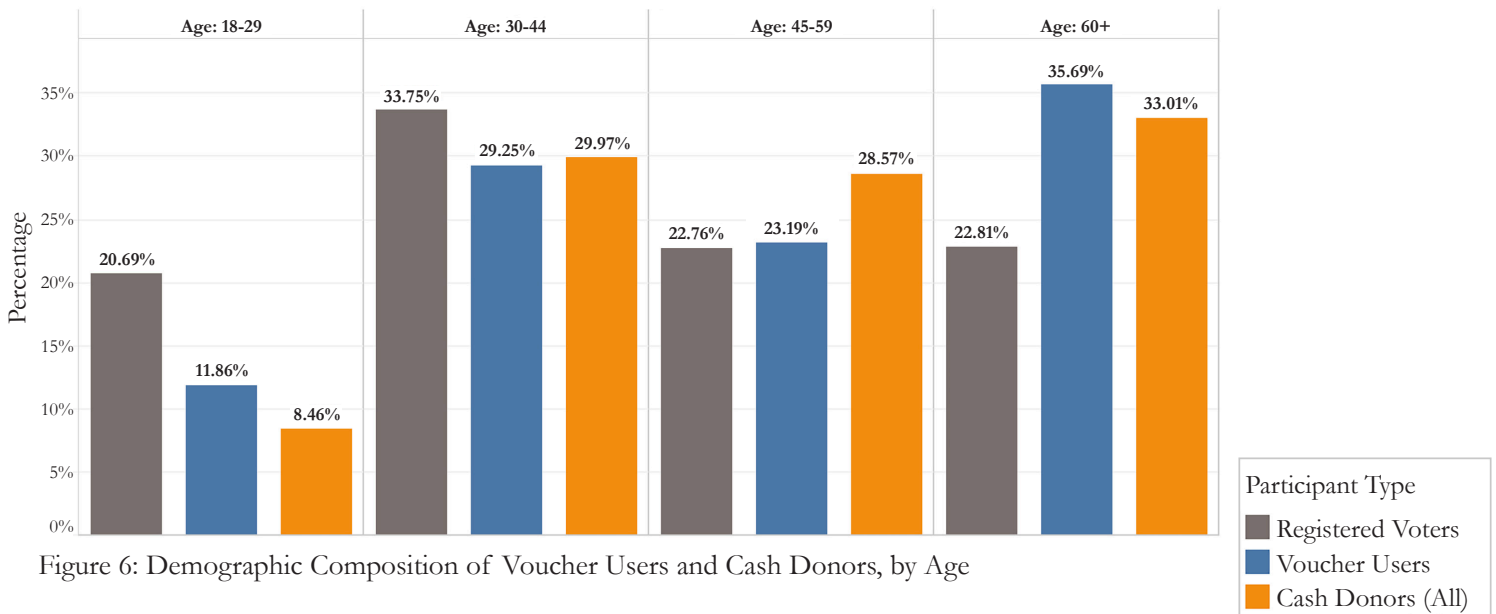


Figure 6: Demographic Composition of Voucher Users and Cash Donors, by Age

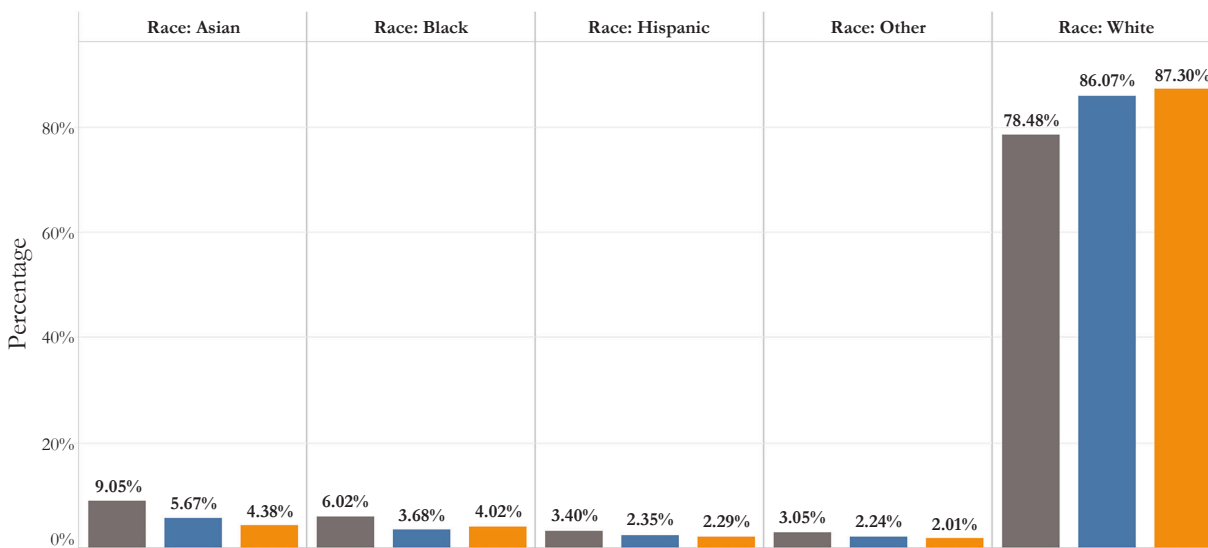


Figure 7: Demographic Composition of Voucher Users and Cash Donors, by Race

The Democracy Voucher program relied less heavily on wealthy Seattle residents than the pool of cash contributors. It increased the representation of low-income residents in the campaign finance system, although high-income households continue to make up a disproportionate share of contributors. Individuals with an income of \$100,000 or more make up 24 percent of cash donors, but they comprise only 16 percent of voucher users. On the other hand, only 4 percent of voucher users – and 2 percent of cash donors – have an income below \$30,000. [Figure 8]

Voucher users were slightly more likely to come from poor neighborhoods – and slightly less likely to come from wealthy ones – than cash donors. Overall, about 22 percent of voucher users live in the wealthiest quintile of neighborhoods in the city and nearly 13

percent live in the poorest quintile of neighborhoods. By contrast, 29 percent of cash donors come from the wealthiest quintile of neighborhoods and only 11 percent come from the poorest neighborhoods. [Figure 9]

Overall, voucher users were more representative of the electorate than cash contributors. Participants in the Democracy Vouchers program were more likely to come from poor neighborhoods than cash donors. The pool of voucher users also includes a larger share of residents earning \$30,000 or less, suggesting that the program has diversified the socioeconomic composition of the donor pool. While the composition of the voucher users does not fully match the composition of the electorate, it is – on the whole – more representative than the composition of cash donors.

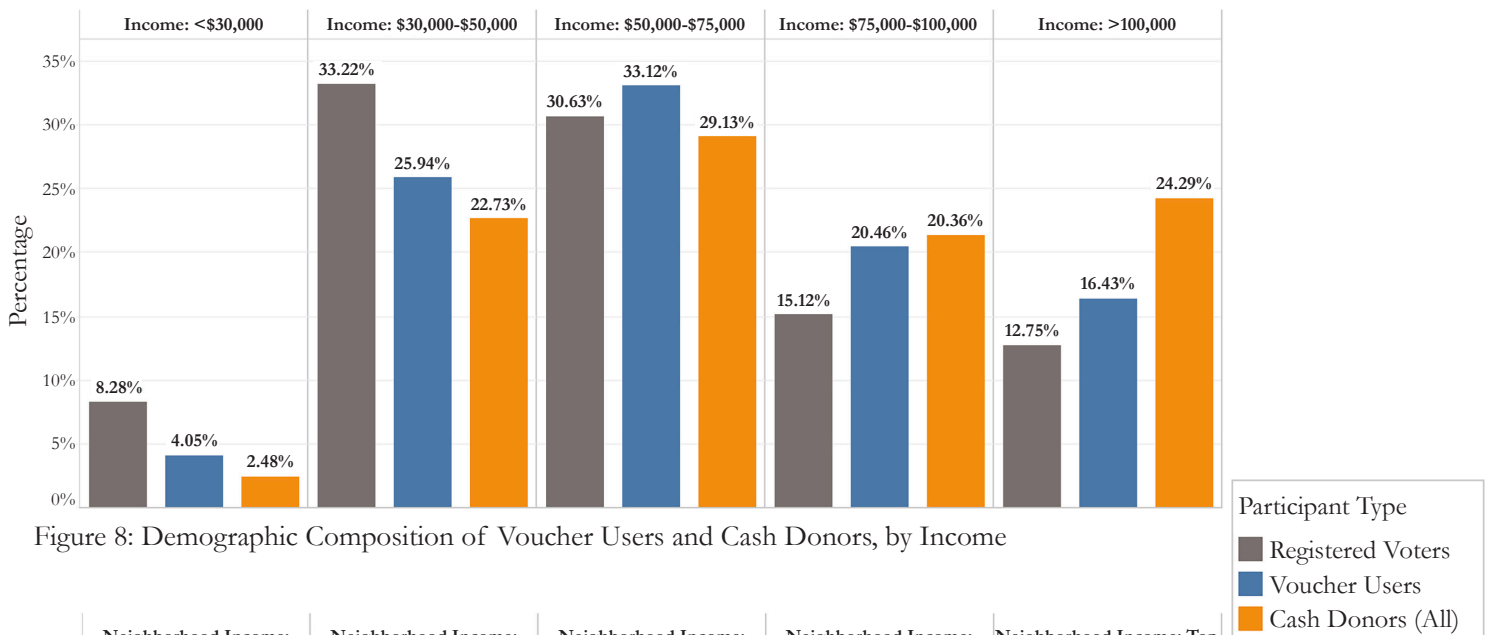


Figure 8: Demographic Composition of Voucher Users and Cash Donors, by Income



Figure 9: Demographic Composition of Voucher Users and Cash Donors, by Neighborhood Income

## Did Voucher Participants Vote at Higher Rates in the 2017 Election?

Seattle residents who used their vouchers were substantially more likely to vote in the 2017 election. Nearly 90 percent of Seattle residents who used their vouchers voted in the 2017 election, but only 43 percent of those who did not use their vouchers voted.

Even after accounting for previous political engagement, these differences between voucher users and non-users persist. Among Seattle residents who voted in fewer than half of the previous elections for which they were eligible, voucher users were four times as likely to vote in the 2017 election. Overall, 53 percent of these voucher users voted in the 2017 election compared to only 12 percent of those who did not return their voucher. Among those who voted in at least half of the elections for which they were registered, about 88 percent of voucher users voted

in the 2017 election compared to only 56 percent of those who did not return their vouchers. [Figure 10]

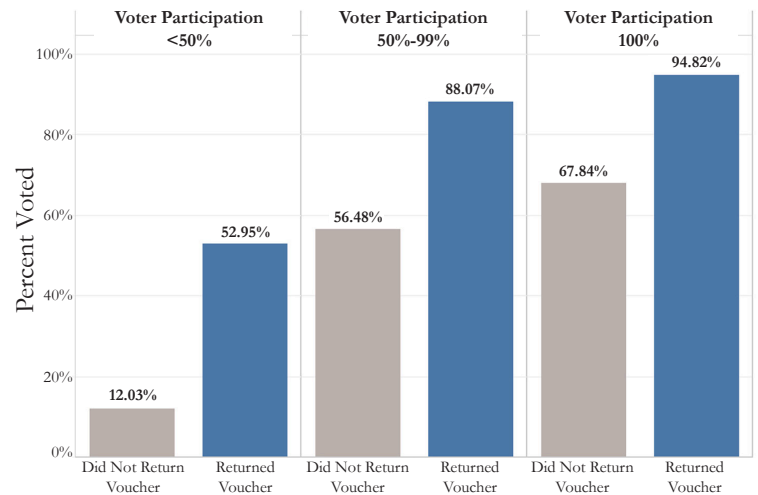


Figure 10: Voter Participation Rate, by Previous Voter Participation and Voucher Status

## Program Background

In 2015, voters in Seattle overwhelmingly passed an initiative to create the Democracy Voucher program. Recognizing the disproportionate influence of a small number of wealthy donors in local elections, advocates for the initiative hoped that a publicly-financed voucher program would increase the number of contributors, create a more diverse donor pool and address concerns about the demographic representativeness of donors in local elections. While several municipalities nationwide have public financing schemes to provide matching funds in local elections, Seattle is the first city to implement a universal voucher program.

Every registered voter in Seattle was mailed four, \$25 vouchers in January 2017. Voters redeemed their vouchers by assigning them to qualified candidates

and returning them to the candidate's campaign or the Seattle Ethics and Election Commission. Upon certifying each returned voucher, the Commission then transferred funds to the assigned campaign.

In 2017, candidates for City Council and City Attorney could participate in the Democracy Voucher program after agreeing to several public debates and adhering to spending and contribution limits. At-large City Council candidates qualified for the program by receiving 400 qualifying donations of \$10. Candidates for City Attorney qualified after receiving 150 qualifying donations of \$10. In future elections, the Democracy Voucher program will expand to include candidates vying for mayor and each of Seattle's seven district-level City Council seats.

## About the Authors

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## About the Data

These analyses were derived from a dataset compiled by the authors. The authors merged data on Seattle voters and their vote history from the Washington Secretary of State with campaign finance and voucher records from the Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission. Catalyst provided the demographic data on registered voters. Geographic information came from the 2016 American Community Survey.

Media inquiries or requests for additional information should be made via email to both authors.

