



Seattle
Ethics & Elections
Commission

Democracy Voucher Program 2025 Annual Report

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Introduction

This report summarizes the administration of the Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission's (SEEC) Democracy Voucher Program (DVP) in the 2025 election cycle. For additional information regarding program implementation and administration, please see prior reports.

Seattle's Democracy Voucher Program is the first public campaign financing program of its kind. In regular election cycles, residents receive four \$25 Democracy Vouchers they can use to support program candidates running for local office. Candidates then collect vouchers to help fund their campaigns.

In 2025, offices on the ballot were the Mayor, City Attorney, City Council Positions 8 and 9. There was also a special election to fill a vacancy in City Council District 2.

A Message from SEEC Executive Director, Wayne Barnett

The 2025 election season marked the 10-year anniversary of the Democracy Voucher Program, and saw voters renew the Program for another 10 years. This report offers a perfect opportunity to reflect on what the program has meant.

Candidate Engagement

Currently, each elected official in Seattle has used the program to fund their campaign. Instead of spending hours cold calling a short list of donors, candidates now spend their time connecting with voters across the city while also collecting vouchers to fund their campaign.

The program is popular for both established and first-time candidates, and most who pledge complete the qualifying process. To date, 167 candidates pledged and 98 qualified to receive funding.

To qualify, candidates must show they are willing and able to launch a viable campaign by collecting \$10 contributions and signatures from Seattle residents. Before funds are released, the commission audits each qualifying contribution and signature. More than 42,000 qualifying submissions have been audited.



Wayne Barnett
Executive Director

Accountability

In addition to auditing campaigns, the program has accounted for 734,351 vouchers returned to our office over the past 10 years. Each voucher goes through several stages of processing and validation, the results of which are published weekly so that the public can monitor our work and their vouchers.

Unlike most of the city's budget, the Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission is responsible for managing the levy funds. The commission's ongoing financial stewardship has kept the program healthy and attractive to candidates.

Public Engagement

Without the public, this program does not exist. Not only do the voters decide on its very existence, but their property tax dollars fund it. Twice now, the City of Seattle has voted for a different way for campaigns to operate. For candidates and donors, for those without access to personal wealth or political power, the program offers another path to participating in local elections.

The most recent research shows that over 100,000 unique individuals in Seattle have used Democracy Vouchers. Unlike cash donors, voucher users come from and represent every corner of our diverse city. We expect that continuing evaluations will only strengthen and support these outcomes.

The program has invested heavily in outreach, offering program access in 20 languages, attending in-person community events, giving talks to community groups and senior centers, and working with other city departments to conduct outreach. Additionally, the program launched the Democracy Voucher Outreach Fund in 2019 and has so far distributed \$1,125,000 to 23 local organizations. These organizations provide civic engagement outreach and education to communities often underserved, many with language or cultural barriers to participation.

We sincerely thank the residents of this city for giving the program another 10 years, and for being willing to try something so simple yet so bold to improve civic engagement.

Democracy Vouchers

Issuing Vouchers

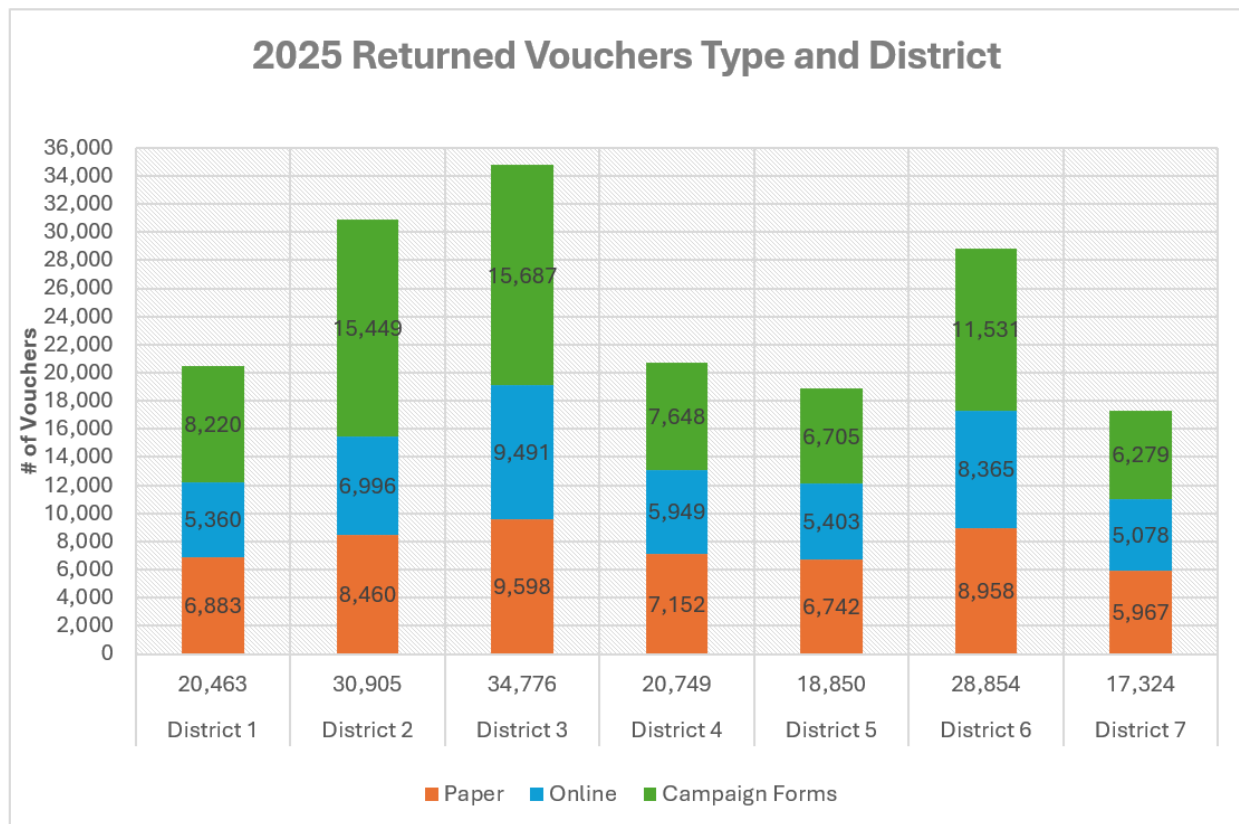
Beginning February 24, 2025, the SEEC began mailing and emailing Democracy Vouchers to Seattle residents, with subsequent monthly mailings to newly registered voters. Just over 517,000 voucher packets were mailed throughout the year.

The SEEC mailed 69,393 inactive registered voters a postcard notifying them of an issue with their voter registration and encouraging them to contact King County Elections.

Processing Vouchers

In 2025, 171,945 vouchers were returned by 45,773 Seattle residents.

- Paper: 53,764, 31%
- Online: 46,662, 27%
- Campaign Forms: 71,519, 42%



District totals do not include vouchers from residents in the Address Confidentiality Program.

Candidates

There were 25 candidates on the primary election ballot. Of the ten who secured a place in the general election, eight were DVP candidates.

Every winning candidate participated in the program.

Office	Non-DVP Candidates	Number of DVP Candidates	Number of Qualified DVP Candidates
Mayor	0	8	3
City Attorney	0	4	4
City Council 9	3	1	1
City Council 8	3	2	1
City Council 2	0	4	4
Total	6	19	13

Contribution limits, Maximum Campaign Valuations, and qualifying requirements varied by position.

Funding

Each year, the program sets aside an Available Program Funds limit. For 2025, \$9 million was available to candidates. Unused funding remains in the program budget to be used for future elections.

\$3,710,300 was distributed to qualified candidates representing 148,412 redeemed vouchers.

Actual Distribution of Available Program Funds to Candidates			
Year	Available Funds	Distributed Funds	Utilization Rate
2017	\$3,000,000	\$1,140,525	38%
2019	\$4,200,000	\$2,454,475	58%
2021	\$6,800,000	\$3,397,050	50%
2023	\$5,250,000	\$2,286,750	44%
2024	\$1,800,000	\$766,025	43%
2025	\$9,000,000	\$3,710,300	41%

Candidate Introductions

All candidates running for Seattle office are invited to submit a Candidate Introduction. Twenty candidates participated.

Candidate Trainings

Candidates and campaign staff are offered training throughout the year. Training sessions are for general DVP usage as well as specialized training for Campaign Replacement Form (CRF) collecting, which is required for paid staff who also collect CRFs. Staff conducted 62 trainings sessions, 41 of which were for CRF collectors.

Communications and Outreach

Media

In 2025, the DVP partnered with 15 ethnic and local media outlets to help spread public awareness of the program. DVP staff worked with media to execute the following campaigns:

- Democracy Voucher Program Launch
- ‘Request Replacement Vouchers’ mid-year campaign
- ‘Final List of Candidates Now Available’

Types of media used to spread program awareness included press releases, newsletter highlights, online, print, and PSA advertisements.

Bus Advertisements

The DVP executed two phases of a bus media advertising campaign to create awareness of the program. The first phase ran in early February and focused on the Democracy Voucher Program Launch, while the second phase ran in May and focused on requesting replacement Democracy Vouchers. Each phase lasted four weeks.

Each advertising campaign included one exterior side advertisement on the bus and one interior advertisement located behind the bus driver. These two high-visibility placements ensured strong exposure to pedestrians and passengers throughout their commute.

Outreach & Marketing Materials

In 2025, staff conducted DVP outreach through both virtual and in-person events. Staff participated in 17 outreach events that included cultural festivals, candidate forums, informational nights, and other community gatherings. Staff also developed marketing materials for distribution at outreach events and provided promotional items such as pens, stickers, fans, and t-shirts.

2025 Democracy Voucher Outreach Fund

The Democracy Voucher Program budgeted \$300,000 for 501(c)(3) organizations to conduct outreach in underserved communities. Of the overall budget, 75% was dedicated to organizations focused on lawful permanent resident enrollment and education.

Organizations conducted outreach based on the following objectives:

- Promote civic engagement in underserved communities by educating residents about the Democracy Voucher Program.
- Provide education and enrollment services with a high degree of cultural competency.
- Remove barriers to the program by providing in-language program education and distributing translated program materials.
- Inform residents how to request Democracy Vouchers in their preferred languages.

Organizations Funded

- Asian Counseling and Referral Service
- Chinese Information and Service Center
- Dignity for Divas
- Eritrean Association in Greater Seattle
- Horn of Africa Services
- Literacy Source
- Orquesta Northwest
- Refugee Women's Alliance
- Somali Cultural Center
- Somali Health Board
- Villa Comunitaria

Outreach Impacts

Direct Outreach

- 175 outreach events
- 13,237 interactions

Digital Outreach

- 49 digital activities
- 22,871 interactions

Materials

- 24,520 outreach materials distributed

Budget Summary Report

Democracy Voucher Program - Budget Summary by Category

Program Administration	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Voucher production and mailing	\$120,517	\$266,324	\$1,101	\$455,115	\$491,731	\$575,353
Outreach media and materials	\$8,680	\$18,509	\$347	\$26,523	\$7,100	\$10,993
Language Access	\$10,932	\$80,735	\$2,143	\$59,779	\$20,005	\$51,234
Outreach contracting and events		\$203,590	\$45,089	\$217,617	\$203,818	\$308,297
King County Elections		\$54,706		\$38,600	\$18,059	\$53,352
Administration and Program Eval *	\$138,301	\$118,722	\$116,850	\$119,560	\$124,242	\$100,501
Program staff	\$370,100	\$427,336	\$486,991	\$504,842	\$555,264	\$647,253
Temp staff		\$131,508		\$43,889		\$193,794
Total	\$648,530	\$1,301,430	\$652,521	\$1,465,925	\$1,420,220	\$1,940,775

Candidate Disbursements	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Total		\$3,397,050		\$2,402,900	\$766,025	\$3,710,300

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Total Program Cost	\$648,530	\$4,698,480	\$652,521	\$3,868,825	\$2,186,245	\$5,651,075

Funding	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Levy	\$3,000,000	\$3,000,000	\$3,000,000	\$3,000,000	\$3,000,000	\$3,000,000
Returned voucher funds		\$21,057		\$51,147	\$301	\$16,982

See prior year reports for 2016 - 2019 budget summaries.