

Memo

To: Commission

From: Wayne Barnett

Date: October 2, 2024

Re: Voucher Program Recommendation

The Democracy Voucher Program expressly lays out few purposes and goals. Section 2.04.690.D says that they *include*, “democracy and accountability, high rates of candidate participation, heavy utilization of vouchers by those who have not previously donated to Seattle political campaigns, and high public satisfaction with the Program.” We sometimes shorten that list to two things we can measure: “more candidates, more contributors.”

Prior to the passage of the initiative that established the Voucher Program, Seattle was experiencing a dearth of candidates, and contributors. A study prepared by the Sightline Institute showed that 1.5 percent of Seattleites ever contributed to a City campaign, and they were not the average City resident. They were predominantly whiter, older, view-property owners. In the Democracy Voucher era, we have seen numbers well beyond any we saw previously, with an average of 49,558 people making contributions over the four cycles since the program’s adoption, compared with 14,570 over the four cycles before the program’s adoption.

And in the last two cycles, we have also seen voucher users come to more closely represent typical Seattleites. When the Program began, voucher users looked more like traditional donors than residents. In the last two cycles, we have made gains in our efforts to broaden the base of voucher users.

Not surprisingly, the average dollar amount of contributions has fallen with the higher numbers of contributors. In 2011, the average amount of a contribution to a candidate peaked at \$231. By last year the number had fallen to \$89 per contributor.

As for candidates, we have seen the number of people stepping forward to run for office rise from approximately 100 over the four elections before the advent of the Program to almost 175 in the four cycles under the Program. The races have also been much more competitive since the Program’s inception, with only one instance where an incumbent avoided a primary, and that was the City Attorney’s race in 2017.

I urge Commissioners to review the reports commissioned after each year of the Program. There is a wealth of data about the Program out there, and every way you slice it points to the Program’s success.