

# ELEVATING MORE VOICES

**How democracy vouchers can diversify  
candidates and donors in Los Angeles**



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**los angeles** for  
**democracy**  
**vouchers**

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# Introduction

Amid a national epidemic of voter suppression, it is essential not only to fight for the preservation of democracy, but to actively work to expand participation to those too often excluded. In Los Angeles, it is vital to uncover the systems that inhibit our democracy's ability to reflect the will of the people and to transform those systems into ones promoting the participation of people from all parts of the city.

In Los Angeles, campaign finance is one of those systems. As our data lays out, money in LA politics comes disproportionately from the wealthiest and whitest neighborhoods, and even from people who don't live in Los Angeles. Additionally, \$22 million in independent expenditures skew the city's political landscape in favor of the corporations and special interests that can afford to spend at such levels. Meanwhile most Angelenos don't give to city candidates, leaving them out of the campaign finance system altogether.

Past reformers have suggested overturning *Citizens United* (the 2010 Supreme Court decision that ended bans on independent expenditures, opening the floodgates to more money in politics) or expanding LA's matching funds program as potential solutions to this problem. We fully support an end to *Citizens United*, but recognize the difficulty of a constitutional amendment. While we work over the long term to create a more fair system nationwide, we must also find policies Los Angeles can implement now. The existing matching funds system has proven effective at engaging more small donors and helping challengers, a step in the right direction. But the system has not

engaged the millions of Angelenos without disposable income, or created a donor base reflective of the broad diversity of Los Angeles. A new approach is needed.

Democracy vouchers, a reform used now in Seattle, offer a potential solution to this problem. In Seattle, every city resident receives 4 vouchers worth \$25 each to donate to city candidates, funded by the city (the program costs ~0.06% of the city budget). Seattle donors are more representative by race, income, and age since the democracy vouchers program was enacted.<sup>1</sup> More candidates have been able to run for office without wealthy donors, leading to the city's most diverse mayoral field ever in 2021.<sup>2</sup> Vouchers have also boosted engagement among previous nonvoters, who turnout at 6-10 times the frequency after using a voucher.<sup>3</sup> Los Angeles could see these same benefits by enacting a similar program.

In this study, we first outline the problem with the status quo campaign finance system in Los Angeles, based on our analysis of reports from the Los Angeles City Ethics Commission. Next, we outline democracy vouchers as a possible solution, giving a case study of Seattle's program, and offering our recommendations for such a policy in Los Angeles. Finally, we offer criteria to evaluate democracy vouchers or other reforms as a guide for future analysis of campaign finance in Los Angeles.

# The Problem: Mass Exclusion from Campaign Finance

## Where does the money come from?

For this study, we analyzed money in the 2020 Los Angeles City Council elections. Our analysis used data from the LA Ethics Commission along with ZIP code level data on race and socioeconomic status from the US Census Bureau. While we focused on the 2020 races, a brief analysis leads us to expect similar results for past cycles.

## Topline Results

- Across seven City Council races in 2020, there was at least **\$10.4 million** in political spending.
- **Just 49.8% of the money** in LA City races comes from people who live in Los Angeles or from the matching funds program
- Money comes **disproportionately from the whitest and wealthiest neighborhoods**

## Breakdown of Money Source

- 36% comes from people who live outside Los Angeles
- 31.6% comes from people who live in Los Angeles
- 19.2% came from the existing matching funds program
- 7.8% comes from special interests based outside of Los Angeles
- 5.4% comes from special interests based inside Los Angeles

This data ignores an **additional \$22 million of independent expenditures**, as it is hard to quantify (1) whether this money was spent to influence city council elections or other races (i.e. school board, state legislature), and (2) whether the groups making independent expenditures are based inside Los Angeles.

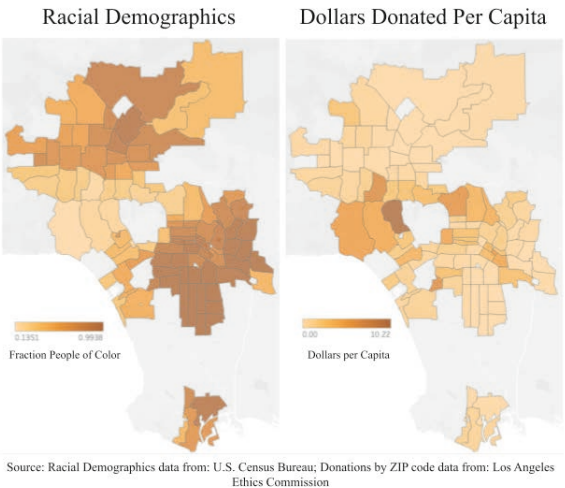
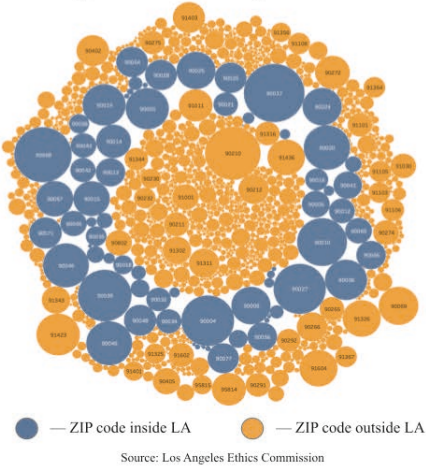
One limitation on our analysis was the distinction between itemized and unitemized contributions. California law requires campaigns to disclose the identities of donors who give more than \$100. Campaigns must disclose the total amount received from smaller donors, but need not disclose their identities. We conservatively assumed that all unitemized donations came from people living within LA City — thus a greater percentage of the money likely comes from people who live outside Los Angeles than the numbers displayed here.

## Racial Donation Gap

Los Angeles City is 70% people of color. However, itemized donations in City Council races come disproportionately from the whitest and wealthiest neighborhoods in the city. All told, majority white ZIP codes gave 2.6 times as much per person as majority people of color ZIP code.

THE PROBLEM: MASS EXCLUSION FROM CAMPAIGN FINANCE

Money in 2020 LA City Council Races



Money affects who gets elected

While analyses of Los Angeles’ specific case are limited, national and state-level studies consistently show that the existing campaign finance system disproportionately benefits white candidates, male candidates, and



incumbents.

Congress, state legislators, and other elected offices are overwhelmingly over 65, white, male, and rich. For example, the United States ranks 87th in terms of representation of women in office, while white people hold 90% of elected offices despite making up only 63% of the overall population.

These disparities make a substantive difference. A 2017 study from Political Parity, a nonpartisan research organization, found that female legislators “are more likely to make bills dealing with women’s issues and children and family issues a priority” such as legislation “on gender equality, reproductive health, and issues affecting children and families.”<sup>4</sup> Further, a 2018 study from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace found that when elected, “women of color tend to advance political agendas that take into account the particular concerns of both women and communities of color.”<sup>5</sup>

Fundraising is not the only structural barrier preventing the halls of power from looking like America, but it is a key piece of the puzzle. Studies demonstrate that reforming campaign finance laws would be a key way to “transfor[m] power inequities...within political institutions.” In a 2019 review of first time candidates from the organization Run for Something, fundraising was cited as one of the top fears of potential candidates when deciding whether to run.<sup>6</sup> New candidates would often report that they “don’t know where to start,” are “missing a plan,” “don’t like asking for money,” or “lack the personal or institutional network for fundraising.”

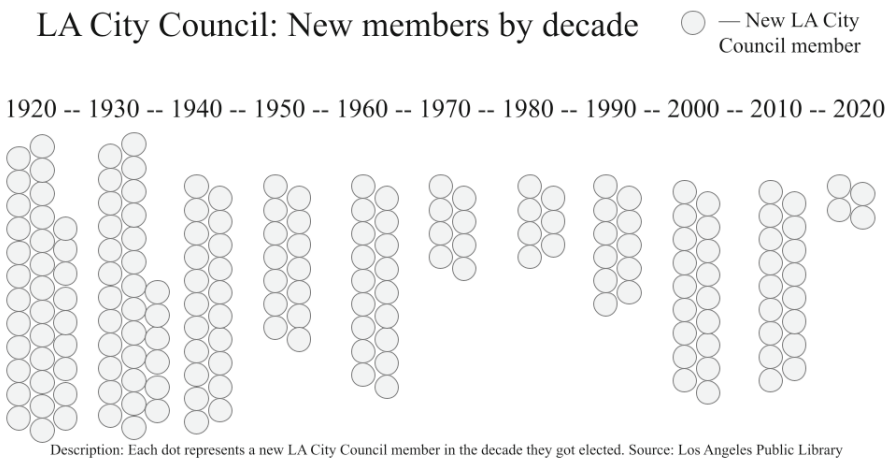
Women in politics “consistently report that fundraising is more difficult for them than for their male counterparts.”<sup>7</sup> Studies support this notion, showing that “women have a larger fundraising base than men,” but tend to raise more from small donors, meaning they “may have to spend more time securing many individual contributions.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, many women have substantial networks, but lack the wealthy fundraising networks of their male counterparts.

With democracy vouchers, candidates won't have to worry as much about finding a wealthy fundraising network, because every network will be a fundraising network.

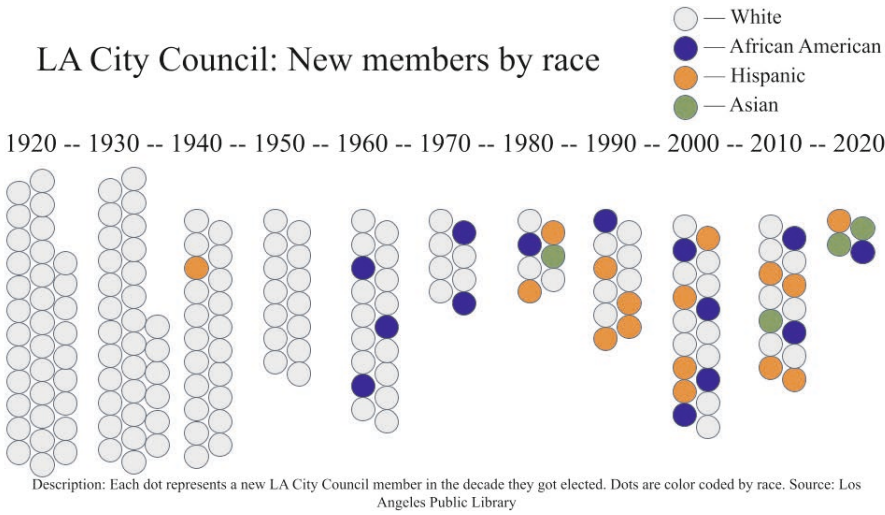
After reviewing different systems across the United States, a 2018 study by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace concluded that “a shift to public financing at the local level would likely benefit women candidates and candidates of color.”<sup>9</sup> Outside the United States, there is further evidence: in Europe, most elections rely primarily on public funding, and European countries consistently rank higher on marks of diversity, such as legislative gender parity.

## Elected Officials in Los Angeles

Studies at the national and state level consistently demonstrate the impact of campaign finance on descriptive representation, but less work has been done to study the representativeness of the LA City Council. We analyzed the last century of elections to the LA City Council, looking at each new member by the decade they got elected. In the first chart, each new member gets a dot by the decade they first joined the council.



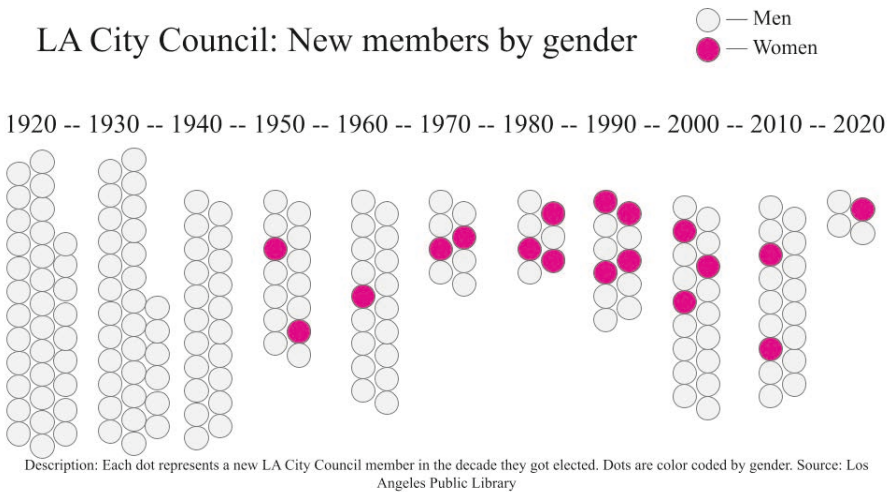
In the next chart, we color dots based on the race of the newly elected City Council member. The lack of representation of people of color in the 20th century is disappointing but expected. Even in recent decades, however, the Los Angeles City Council has continued to be disproportionately white, in a city that is 70% people of color.



The next chart colors dots based on the gender of the newly elected City

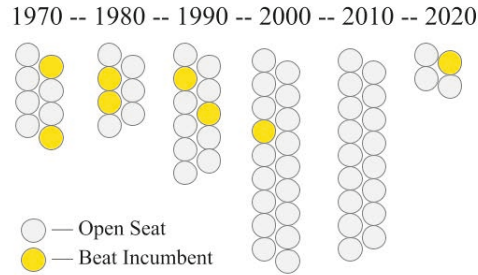
## THE PROBLEM: MASS EXCLUSION FROM CAMPAIGN FINANCE

Council member. Again, the lack of representation in early decades is disappointing but unsurprising. In recent decades, however, the Council has remained overwhelmingly male. This chart presents stark evidence of structural sexism within our political system.



The final chart looks at the last 50 years of new City Council members, based on whether they won an open seat or defeated an incumbent. Out of 65 new members, just 8 won by defeating incumbents.

## LA City Council: New members by whether they defeated an incumbent



Description: Each dot represents a new LA City Council member in the decade they got elected. Dots are color coded by whether the member defeated an incumbent or ran in an open seat. Source: Los Angeles Public Library

Campaign finance reform will not solve all the problems of racism, sexism, and xenophobia that hold our city back. Nevertheless it is clear that fixing our campaign finance system is one step that Los Angeles can take towards creating a more equitable system in which everyone can participate.

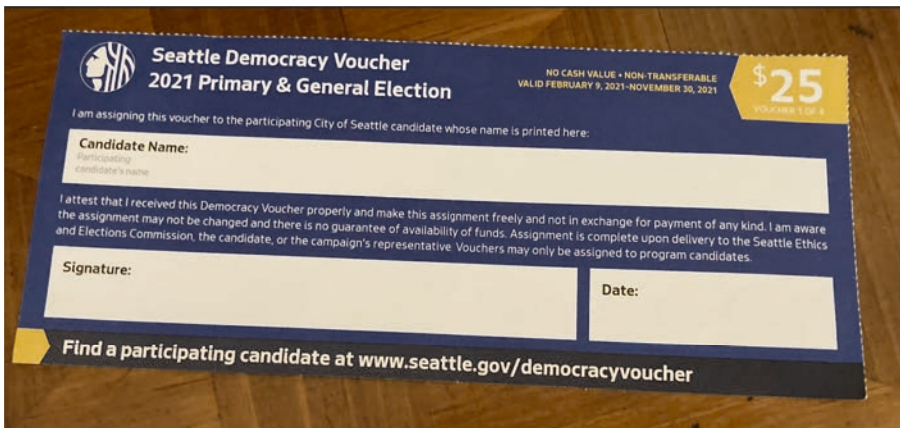
# The Solution: Democracy Vouchers

“Democracy vouchers” is a campaign finance system in which all residents are issued vouchers that they can donate to political candidates who, in turn, redeem them for public campaign funds. Democracy vouchers help democratize campaign finance by both: empowering ordinary citizens to participate more in the financing of political campaigns; and empowering political candidates to run for office without relying on — and spending as much time courting — wealthy donors.

In 2015, Seattle became the first US jurisdiction to launch a democracy vouchers program. After a ballot initiative passed, the program was implemented in Seattle’s 2017, 2019, and 2021 municipal elections. Each cycle, every city resident receives four vouchers worth \$25 a piece to donate to local candidates. While big-dollar fundraising is still legal for candidates who opt-out of the voucher program, campaign finance in the city has dramatically improved. Donors are now more representative in terms of race, income, and age, and more evenly distributed throughout the city.<sup>10</sup> Voter engagement has increased, for after using vouchers, people become substantially more likely to vote.<sup>11</sup> In part, this is because voucher candidates spend more time talking to ordinary people, as everyone has the capacity to give \$100 (the value of Seattle’s vouchers), regardless of their disposable income. New and diverse candidates can run for office and win—with many reporting they could not have raised enough money without vouchers.<sup>12</sup> Most candidates use vouchers, including most winners: eight of nine sitting council members, for example, used vouchers in their last election, as did the current mayor

and city attorney (as of 2022).<sup>13</sup>

A functioning democracy requires the engagement of ordinary people, as voters, donors, and candidates. Democracy vouchers help meet this requirement not just by limiting big money, but by increasing small money. Every citizen is empowered to donate and every candidate is empowered to use whatever network they have, no matter how economically disadvantaged, as a fundraising base. Plus, through extra regulations on candidates who opt-in to soliciting vouchers, the system can enforce spending limits, contribution limits, and disclosure requirements on more candidates and races. By helping make the campaign for donations better resemble the campaign for votes, a democracy vouchers system deepens American democracy.



## Element 1: Establish the system

Los Angeles could establish a democracy vouchers system for City Council and citywide elections. Below is a sketch of how a voucher system could be designed, though all variables — such as the value of each voucher, the date vouchers are sent out, and program qualification thresholds — should ultimately be decided in partnership with community leaders.

## THE SOLUTION: DEMOCRACY VOUCHERS

Nine months before Election Day, every eligible resident is sent four vouchers via mail and e-mail, worth \$25 each in public campaign funds. Vouchers go to any adult who can legally donate to campaigns—not solely to registered voters. Currently, all US citizens, nationals, and lawful permanent residents can donate. In Seattle, citizens and permanent residents get vouchers, as long as they are 18 by Election Day and reside in the city.

Residents can make use of their vouchers by:

1. Assigning them to a candidate and returning them to the state through the mail (Seattle's vouchers come with a prepaid return envelope);
2. Assigning them to a candidate and submitting them to the state through an online portal; or
3. Giving them to a candidate directly for that candidate to redeem. (In Seattle, many candidates carry "voucher replacement forms" when canvassing, in case someone wants to contribute but doesn't know where their physical vouchers are. The city crosschecks to make sure that no one uses more than four vouchers.)

To begin soliciting, receiving, and redeeming vouchers, candidates need to qualify for and register with the voucher program. First, candidates must demonstrate viability by receiving a certain number of donations of a certain size from a certain number of people (e.g., "at least \$5 from at least 0.1% of registered voters in the area they are running to represent"). Next, candidates must formally opt-in to the program by signing a contract with the relevant governmental body (such as the LA Ethics Commission), binding them to program rules.

After qualifying, candidates can begin redeeming vouchers they collect for public money. To reduce administrative costs, money could be given to candidates every two weeks. Some voucher advocates have suggested giving candidates a small grant upon qualification to help cover short-term costs before they've had time to raise money through vouchers (though Seattle's



program does not include this).

One concern among those newly introduced to vouchers is fraud. In reality, however, voucher fraud is no more likely than voter fraud, posing a negligible risk for future cities and states implementing vouchers. In Seattle, it is a gross misdemeanor<sup>14</sup> to “buy, sell, trade, forge, steal, or otherwise misuse vouchers.” Campaigns found to have benefited from voucher fraud must return public money and may no longer be eligible for the program. Additionally, voucher assignments are transparent: Seattle provides an online portal where anyone can check who has assigned their vouchers, to which candidates, and when. These steps have made voucher fraud essentially unheard of in Seattle.

Another question is cost. Fortunately, there are three built-in limitations on the costs of voucher systems. First, not every eligible resident will use their vouchers. In 2017 and 2019, participation rates in Seattle were 3.8% and 8.5% respectively, an increase in donor participation from before vouchers, but not a significant burden on the city’s ability to pay.<sup>15</sup> Second, candidates should face a cap on their total spending (as explained below), meaning there is a limit to how many vouchers any one candidate can redeem. Third, as a final stop-gap, democracy voucher programs can impose reasonable limits on total public spending.<sup>16</sup> For example, before each election cycle, the Seattle Ethics & Elections Commission announces the maximum they will spend on redeemed vouchers and alerts candidates and the public if that limit is reached. The limit was not reached in 2017 or 2019. Using Seattle’s program as a baseline and assuming a voter participation rate of 10-15%, our conservative estimates suggest Los Angeles could expect to spend \$15-20 million per year on democracy vouchers, or 0.16% of the city budget (for reference, the city spent roughly \$2 million on its matching funds in 2020).

Possible funding sources for a democracy voucher program include an allocation from the state general fund or a new levy directed specifically to the program. Seattle voters, for example, passed a 10-year property tax levy of \$3 million per year to fund the program.

## Element 2: Require candidates to opt-in to additional rules before receiving public money

An added benefit of a democracy voucher program is a requirement that candidates abide by certain rules, such as contribution limits, spending limits, and debate participation. Courts have held that states and municipalities can impose these restrictions on participants because the program is voluntary.<sup>17</sup>

### Contribution limits

Most proponents believe that voucher candidates should be allowed to accept private contributions in addition to what they receive in vouchers. Most also believe that voucher programs should limit those additional donations, to ensure the voucher system is not simply a marginal supplement to a private fundraising race that has the same dynamics the voucher system is trying to disrupt. One possibility, for example, is to limit voucher candidates to half the normal contribution limits for the race (e.g. if a non-voucher candidate is capped at raising \$1,000 in private contributions from an individual, a voucher candidate would be capped at \$500). In Seattle, non-voucher candidates for all races have a \$550 contribution limit.<sup>18</sup> Voucher candidates for city council and city attorney have a \$300 contribution limit (not including the value of vouchers), while voucher candidates for mayor still have a \$550 contribution limit (including the value of vouchers).<sup>19</sup>

This limitation can also apply to a candidate's own money. A voucher program, for example, could limit voucher candidates to treat themselves as any other contributor — i.e. candidates can give themselves their own vouchers and spend additionally up to the individual contribution limit.

## Spending limits

Voucher programs can put a cap on total spending by a voucher candidate during a campaign. While it is important to cap spending to ensure reasonable limits on the use of public money, it is also important to make the voucher program generous enough that candidates choose to participate (the program is optional, after all). Los Angeles should look to past campaigns to set spending limits, and be ready to update after each election.

## Disclosure requirements

Voucher programs can place disclosure requirements on participating candidates that go beyond those required of all candidates. Voucher candidates, for example, should be subject to regular audits to confirm they are following the rules of the program.

In the interest of transparency, Seattle makes every redeemed voucher public information, accessible via a website. This includes the name of the person who used the voucher, the name of the candidate, and the date the voucher was used. Some voucher advocates in other cities and states disagree about whether this degree of transparency should be included in future programs. In general, cash donations to political candidates are public information, displaying the donor's name and the candidate's name, as well as other information such as the donor's ZIP code and occupation. However, votes are not public information, in order to protect the privacy of political affiliation. Los Angeles will have to decide whether to include an online portal like Seattle's, and if so what information to include. For example, the city could design a system that publicly releases the number of vouchers a person uses, but not the candidate they assign their vouchers to.

## Public debates

In the interest of promoting civil discourse, voucher candidates can be required to take part in a certain number of public debates in both the primary and general election. Non-voucher candidates should be invited, but cannot be legally required to attend. If no opponent chooses to attend, voucher candidates could be required to hold a publicly accessible town-hall style event instead.

## PAC money

Voucher candidates can be banned from accepting money from PACs and corporations. With such a requirement, the only legal sources of funding for voucher candidates would be vouchers (redeemed for public money) and contributions from individuals up to the voucher candidate contribution limit. Seattle's voucher program did not place additional restrictions on the ability of candidates to fundraise from PACs and corporations.<sup>20</sup>

## Trigger mechanisms

Like every public financing system, democracy voucher programs are only constitutional if participation is optional for candidates. Thus, for the program to have any impact, candidates need to believe it is in their best interests to participate. In particular, voucher candidates must know they will not be disadvantaged if their opponent does not opt-in to the program.

If a candidate does not participate in the program, they do not face any of the additional restrictions placed on voucher candidates. To help voucher candidates remain competitive in this situation, "trigger mechanisms" can release voucher candidates from some program rules if a non-participating opponent passes certain spending levels. Trigger mechanisms should also account for independent spending on behalf of one candidate or against another.

For example, if spending by a voucher candidate's opponent plus independent expenditures backing the opponent or opposing the voucher candidate exceeds a certain threshold, and the voucher candidate raises enough money to reach their spending limit, then the voucher candidate would face substantial constraints on their campaign because of their participation in the program. In this case, future programs could imitate Seattle's model: the voucher candidate should be released from all program rules and treated like a non-voucher candidate. Importantly, this would not let them redeem more vouchers. Instead, they could raise contributions up to the legal non-voucher limit, take corporate or PAC money up to legal amounts for non-voucher candidates, and would no longer face a spending limit. Conversely, if a voucher candidate's opponent does not exceed the spending limit, the voucher candidate must follow the program rules for the entire election cycle. Similarly, if two voucher candidates face one another, they must both follow program rules throughout the entire cycle.

Fundamentally, the ideal is to have every candidate participate in the voucher program and voluntarily take on the more civically beneficial rules that come with participation. However, when one candidate does not participate, the program needs to be designed so as not to be a liability for their opponents who do participate. Put another way, candidates need to see the voucher program as something that could help them win, rather than an unnecessary burden on their campaign.

Importantly, the trigger mechanisms outlined here are substantially different from the unconstitutional trigger mechanisms at issue in *McComish v. Bennett*. In *McComish*, the trigger mechanisms were ruled unconstitutional because they were tied to escalating lump sum grants, and thus one candidates' spending led to another candidate receiving extra public money. In the voucher case, the trigger mechanism would result merely in additional private fundraising, but would not result in any additional spending of public money, as more democracy vouchers could not be redeemed.

## Penalties for rule violations

Buying, selling, trading, forging, stealing, or otherwise misusing vouchers should be made a gross misdemeanor. Campaigns found to have deliberately benefited from voucher fraud should be required to return public money and should no longer be eligible for the program, as is the case in Seattle. Future legislation should include an audit mechanism to ensure compliance with program rules.

## Element 3: Increase public awareness of the program to ensure adequate participation

Increasing citizen participation, particularly in traditionally underrepresented communities, should be a central goal of any Los Angeles democracy vouchers program. Maximizing participation will require investments in public awareness.

### Focus groups

At least a year prior to first use, the commission administering the voucher program should begin conducting focus groups with potential voucher users. Leading up to the first use of vouchers in 2017, Seattle conducted focus groups in four different communities.<sup>21</sup> 95% of focus group participants had not heard of the program and 65% “had never contributed to a candidate or campaign.” These discussions helped voucher administrators determine baseline public awareness, opinions, and misconceptions about the program. This information was used to inform Seattle’s messaging strategies.

## Communication and messaging

On first use, many residents and candidates will not have heard of the voucher program. It is essential that Los Angeles invest in messaging for candidates and for residents on what vouchers are and how to use them. Eighteen months before Seattle's first voucher election, the city began producing content on "how to run for office using Democracy Vouchers," and answering questions from potential candidates. As with any change to incentive structures, it can take some time for participants to adapt and understand how to operate within the new system. States can expedite this process by providing resources to help campaigns understand how to use vouchers to their advantage (e.g., "Canvassing is now more important, because every door you knock on is a potential \$100," or "Call time is now less important, because your campaign has easier sources of fundraising").

Public messaging towards city residents about democracy vouchers is also essential. Twelve months before the first voucher election, Seattle sent an informational mailer to 340,000 Seattle residential addresses with basic information about vouchers.<sup>22</sup> Even once residents have used the system, messaging remains important. Each election cycle, Seattle has spent ~\$1,000 on social media advertising (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Nextdoor ads), reaching over 100,000 people, and ~\$2,500 on printing and placing posters in business districts. Five months before each election, Seattle launches a "mid-year reminder campaign" to encourage residents to use their vouchers and remind them they can get replacements if lost. The city also produces short how-to videos on receiving, filling out, and returning vouchers.<sup>23</sup>

## Accessibility and community involvement

To simplify participation, Los Angeles should create a website where users can learn about program rules and eligibility, apply for and submit vouchers, and learn about candidates. In 2017, Seattle's website received nearly two million unique page views. Seattle also implemented a hotline for questions,

which averaged 1500 calls per election cycle.<sup>24</sup>

Los Angeles should prioritize engaging traditionally underrepresented groups by administering the program in multiple languages and working with community groups that can spread information about the program. In Seattle, the voucher program was administered in 15 languages, meaning key materials and advertising were translated and support was available in each language. Seattle worked with ten community-based organizations, conducting or attending 276 outreach events, including candidate forums, cultural events, and leadership group meetings, in order to access “hard-to-reach communities.” Seattle also worked with community groups to craft messaging to underrepresented communities, such as adopting edits from several groups to the non-citizen voucher application form.

## Case Study: Seattle

In 2015, Seattle approved Initiative 122, or “Honest Elections Seattle,” with 63% of the vote. Among other reforms, I-122 created a democracy vouchers program, to be managed by the existing Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission (SEEC). The program is funded by a property-tax levy of \$3 million per year.

The program was first administered for the 2017 election. Two city council races and the city attorney’s race were eligible for vouchers. The 2017 mayoral race was ineligible for vouchers (vouchers were eligible for 2021 mayoral race, and will be eligible for mayoral races going forward). On January 3, 2017, the SEEC mailed democracy vouchers to all 540,000 registered voters in the city (other residents could apply for vouchers, but did not receive them automatically). Overall, 80,000 vouchers were returned. Across three eligible races, 17 candidates pledged to participate, including five of six general election candidates and all general election winners.



In 2019, the program was again administered for seven city council races. On February 12, 2019, the SEEC mailed vouchers to 450,293 residents. 35 candidates qualified for the program, including six of seven general election winners. In total, 147,128 vouchers were returned, nearly doubling the 2017 rate.

In 2021, the program was administered for both at-large city council races and for the mayor's and city attorney's race. All general election winners used vouchers, including both mayoral candidates in the general election.

The program's two official goals were to "increase the number of contributors... and increase the number of candidates."<sup>25</sup> Both goals have been achieved. The implementation of vouchers doubled the average number of contributors and the program has succeeded at attracting new candidates.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, voucher donors more closely match the demographics of registered voters in the city.<sup>27</sup> Prior to vouchers, one of the best predictors of who would be a cash donor was whether or not someone lived in a house with a view of the water.<sup>28</sup> Today, that is no longer true — donors are more diverse by race, income, age, and location within the city.<sup>29</sup>

What's more, there is evidence that voucher users were more likely to vote than other registered voters (even after accounting for prior levels of engagement). One study of the 2017 election found that after using a voucher, low propensity voters became 7.4 times more likely to vote, while previous nonvoters became 10.2 times more likely to vote.<sup>30</sup> These stunning numbers are likely the result of the increased interactions between candidates and low propensity voters that the program incentivizes. Previously, many Seattle residents reported that their door had never been knocked on by a candidate or campaign worker, leading to a vicious cycle of low turnout in which people don't vote because they aren't asked, and candidates don't show up in their neighborhood because they don't vote. With democracy vouchers, however, candidates are incentivized to knock on as many doors as possible in every neighborhood because everyone they speak to is a potential \$100 for their

campaign. Thus, the cycle of disengagement is broken, demonstrating the power of public policy to boost engagement and decrease cynicism.

Surveys show a “high level of public awareness,” with only 37% of residents reporting that they had never heard of the program in March 2018.<sup>31</sup> Awareness is especially high among people of color, with only 25% of those surveyed having not heard of the program. Of those “very familiar” with democracy vouchers, 79% agreed that the program had accomplished its goals in the 2017 elections.

In 2017, a Seattle based group called the Pacific Legal Foundation filed a lawsuit in King County Superior Court, arguing that Seattle’s democracy vouchers program was unconstitutional. The group argued that the program violated their First Amendment “right not to speak” by “using [our] money for political campaigns [we] may or may not agree with.”<sup>32</sup> After the Superior Court upheld the democracy vouchers program, the Pacific Legal Foundation appealed to the Washington State Supreme Court.

In a unanimous decision, the Washington State Supreme Court also upheld the program.<sup>33</sup> In his decision, Judge Gonzalez wrote that the plaintiffs could not show the program “individually associated them with any message conveyed by the Democracy Voucher Program.” Further, he wrote that “the government has a legitimate interest in its public financing of elections.”<sup>34</sup> The Supreme Court declined to hear an appeal, thus tacitly accepting the program’s constitutionality.<sup>35</sup>

## Criteria for evaluating democracy vouchers in LA

1. Would democracy vouchers increase the share of money coming from within LA City?
2. Would democracy vouchers increase the share of money coming from people, as opposed to special interest groups?
3. Would democracy vouchers make campaign finance more equitable by boosting donations from ZIP codes with a high percentage of people of color?
4. Would democracy vouchers incentivize candidates to spend less time on the phone with wealthy donors and more time talking to regular people?
5. Would democracy vouchers boost political engagement within Los Angeles?
6. Considering (1) reasonable estimates of public usage levels, (2) reasonable spending limits for candidates, and (3) an overall spending limit for each program cycle (like in Seattle), how much would democracy vouchers cost to implement in Los Angeles?

# Conclusion

Knowing where contributions come from explains who can run for office, which candidates get elected, and which policies get prioritized. Los Angeles is an influential city, with an economy matching small countries. Wealthy donors know that and spend exorbitantly to make sure their interests get attention at City Hall. Unless we democratize campaign finance, policy responses to our city's growing list of crises — housing, homelessness, drought and shootings, among others — will continue to be set by non-residents, special interests, and wealthier, whiter neighborhoods.

If corporations, special interests, and people who don't live in LA were casting ballots in our elections, drowning out the voices of ordinary Angelenos, we wouldn't stand for it. But when the vast majority of campaign money comes from a source that isn't someone living in LA, we call it politics as usual.

We don't have to settle for this status quo. LA elections shouldn't be funded solely by corporations, special interests and the well-connected — they should be funded by Angelenos. The City of Los Angeles should take a leadership role in the nation in democratizing campaign financing and implement a democracy vouchers program

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# Notes

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