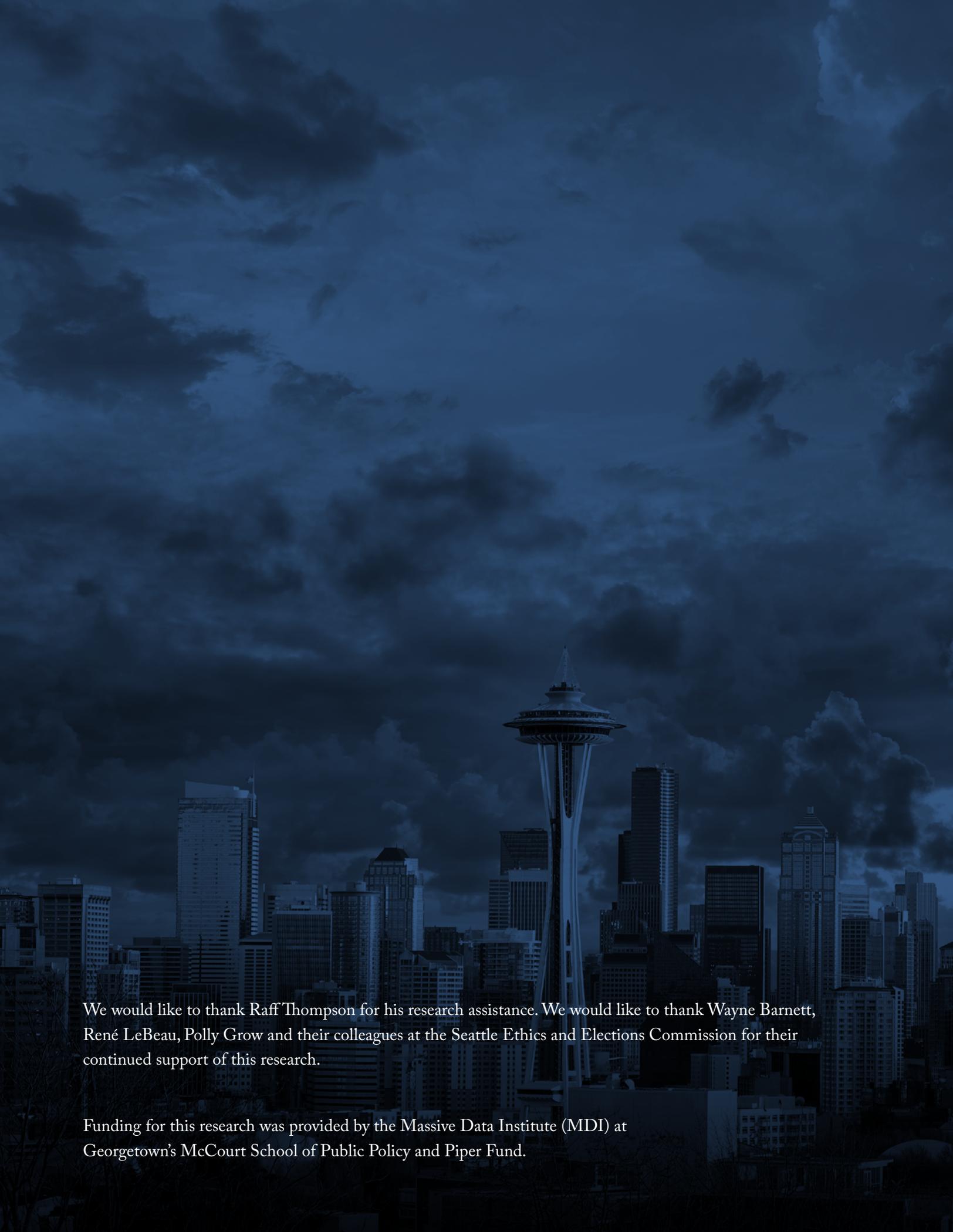
A photograph of the Seattle skyline at sunset. The Space Needle is the central focus, with other skyscrapers visible. The sky is filled with dramatic, colorful clouds in shades of blue, orange, and pink. The city lights are beginning to glow.

# BROADENING DONOR PARTICIPATION *in* LOCAL ELECTIONS

*Results from the Seattle Democracy Voucher Program in 2021*

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## *Executive Summary*

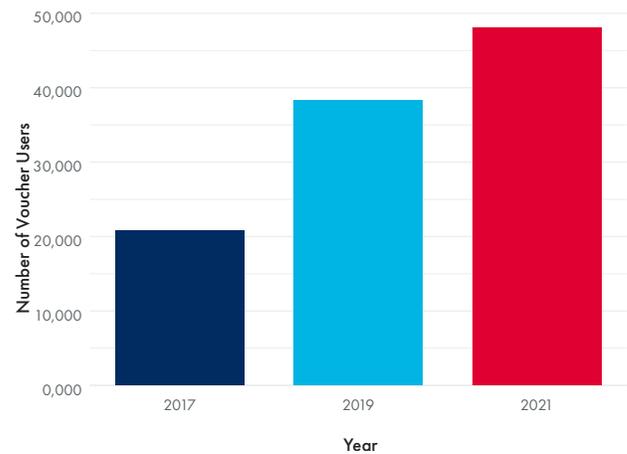
- The Democracy Voucher program in Seattle completed its third election in 2021. The 2021 cycle featured an open seat mayoral race, two at-large city council contests, and the race for city attorney. Six of the eight general elections candidates funded their campaigns with democracy vouchers.
- More than 48,000 Seattle residents used their democracy vouchers in 2021. As a percentage of the voting age population, the participation rate reached a new high of 7.59%.
- Participation in the program increased across all demographic groups. Relative to 2017, some of the largest percentage gains in participation were concentrated among people of color, younger, and lower income residents.
- Overall, voucher users were similar to voters in the 2021 general elections in terms of age, income and race. We also note a diversification of the cash donor pool with higher shares of younger residents and people of color among cash donors than among active voters and, in some cases, than among voucher users.

## Background

The Seattle Democracy Voucher program is a novel public campaign financing program that gives voters and residents the power to fund local elections. Under the program, voters in Seattle receive 4 twenty-five-dollar vouchers to allocate to candidates running for local offices. Voters may send their vouchers to any qualified candidate running in an eligible city election. Candidates qualify for the program by collecting qualifying signatures and low-dollar donations from Seattle residents. The program was first implemented in 2017 for at-large city council and city attorney races and expanded to seven districted city council races in 2019.

The 2021 elections featured the mayor race, two at-large city council seats and the race for city attorney. The two at-large city council seats attracted a total of 18 candidates in the primary and general elections with eight candidates participating in the Democracy Voucher program. The city attorney race drew three candidates, all of whom participated in the voucher program. For the first time in 2021, Seattleites could also use their vouchers in the mayoral contest. The program's first mayoral contest featured a total of fifteen candidates in the primary and general elections. Ten of these candidates participated in the program including both general election candidates, M. Lorena González and Bruce Harrell.

**Figure 1: Total Voucher Users in 2017, 2019 and 2021**



## Section 1: Voucher Usage

Since 2017, the number of Seattle residents participating in the Democracy Voucher program has climbed steadily. In 2017, 20,727 individuals returned their vouchers. In 2019, the number of participants nearly doubled to 38,297. In 2021, the program added nearly 10,000 more participants with 48,071 Seattle residents allocating their vouchers in local races. As a share of the voting age population in Seattle, voucher participation reached an all-time high of 7.59% in 2021.<sup>1</sup>

While the number of voucher users increased, there has also been a steady increase in the number of Seattle residents who have participated in financing local races by making cash donations to candidates running for local office. In 2013, the donor participation rate stood at 1.49%. By 2021, it had more than doubled to 3.4%. This increase could, in part, be related to the voucher program itself as residents

<sup>1</sup> We calculate the participation rate as a share of the 18+ Seattle population using the American Community Survey 2020 5-year estimates. The 2020 5-year estimates are the most up-to-date estimates available as of this writing. In 2020, there were 633,500 residents aged 18 and over in Seattle (US Census Bureau 2020). Alternately, the participation rate may be calculated as a percentage of all residents who received a voucher in 2021. Using the 512,746 residents who received a voucher, the participation rate was 9.38%.

gain familiarity with the campaign finance system and the voucher system attracts a larger number of candidates that mobilize a wider swath of the public.

Seattle residents may return their vouchers by mail, online, or directly to candidates.<sup>2</sup> In 2021, mail remained the most common mode of return for vouchers with 48% of vouchers delivered this way. Since Washington state conducts its voting via mail, Seattle residents may be most familiar with this method of return. About 30% of vouchers were returned directly to candidates and about 22% were redeemed online in 2021.

**Figure 2: Number of Vouchers Returned Over Time**

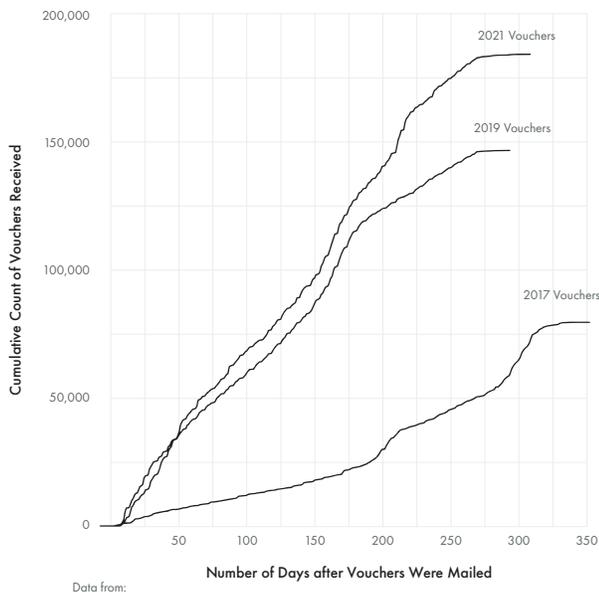
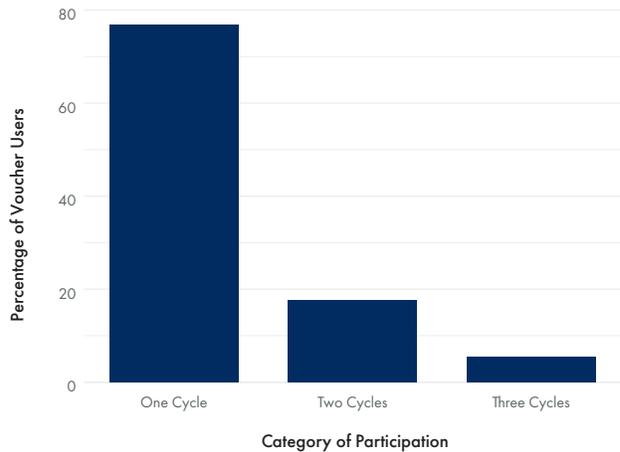


Figure 2 plots the daily number of vouchers returned after the vouchers were mailed to Seattle residents. The figure shows that a higher volume of vouchers was returned at each point during the 2021 election season than in any previous year of the program. Cumulatively, the

2021 cycle saw over 180,000 vouchers returned to candidates running for local office compared to 75,000 in 2017 and nearly 150,000 in 2019.

**Figure 3: First-Time Voucher Users in 2019, 2021**

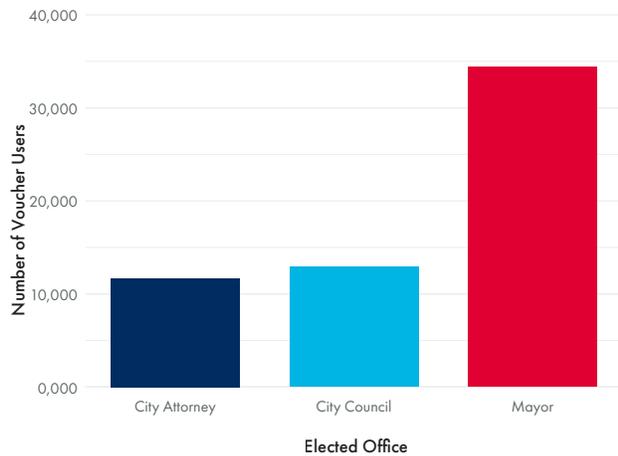


Since its inception, most participants in the Democracy Voucher program participated in only a single election cycle, rather than participating in 2 or 3 cycles. In total, 83,204 unique individuals participated in the Democracy Voucher program *at some point* during the three election cycles. This represents about 13 percent of the current Seattle adult population. About 77 percent of these participants participated in a single election cycle – they gave only in 2017, 2019 *or* 2021. In total, 12 percent of participants gave vouchers *only* in 2017; 26 percent gave vouchers only in 2019; and 39 percent of participants gave only in 2021. Only about 5 percent of participants used their vouchers *in all three cycles*. The remaining 18 percent of participants participated in two (of the three) election cycles. These findings suggest that the voucher program is opening space for new participants in local

<sup>2</sup> In 2021, several candidate campaigns used paid canvassers to solicit and collect democracy vouchers. These vouchers are counted as returned to candidates.

politics, rather than entrenching a class of consistent voucher users.

**Figure 4: Voucher Users in Mayor, City Council and City Attorney Races**



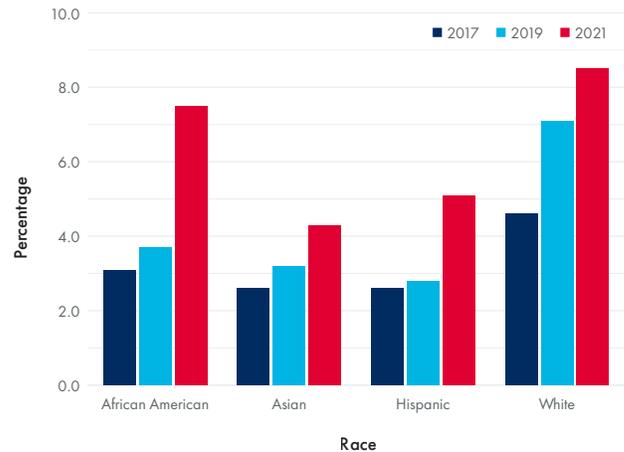
In 2021, voucher users overwhelmingly participated in the Mayoral election. In total, 34,395 voucher users gave at least one voucher to a mayoral candidate. Among these voucher users in the Mayoral election, about 71 percent of them – 24,424 individuals – gave exclusively to the Mayoral election. The remaining 29 percent split their vouchers by giving to a Mayoral candidate and a candidate in the Council race, the City Attorney race, or both.

In total, 12,923 users gave to at least one City Council Candidate and 11,670 gave to at least one candidate for City Attorney. Compared to the Mayoral election, voucher users were less likely to give exclusively to these races. In fact, only 38 percent of users who gave to a Council race – 4,941 voucher users – gave exclusively in the Council contests. About 53 percent of users who gave in the City Attorney race – 6,809 users – gave exclusively in that race.

## Section 2: Participation Rates

Participation in the Democracy Voucher program has historically been uneven across racial and demographic groups. In previous election cycles, White residents participated at higher rates than residents of color. Older individuals participated at higher rates than the young. While those patterns hold true in the 2021 election cycle, we report an increase in participation rates across demographic groups – an important pattern to ensure more representative participation.

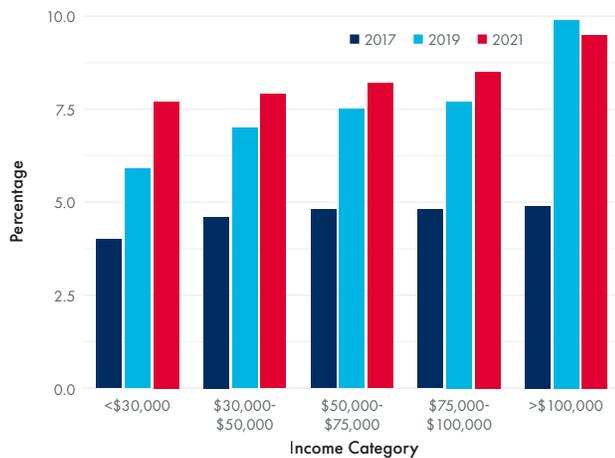
**Figure 5: Participation Rates by Race**



Between 2017 and 2021, the participation rate for the Democracy Voucher program rose across all racial groups, although the most significant percentage increases were among Black and Hispanic residents. In 2021, about 8.5 percent of White residents participated in the program – an increase from 4.6 percent two years earlier. Participation among Asian-Americans climbed from 2.6 to 4.3 percent. Among Hispanic residents, participation in the voucher program nearly doubled from 2.6 percent to 5.1 percent. Similarly, among Black Seattleites, participation more than

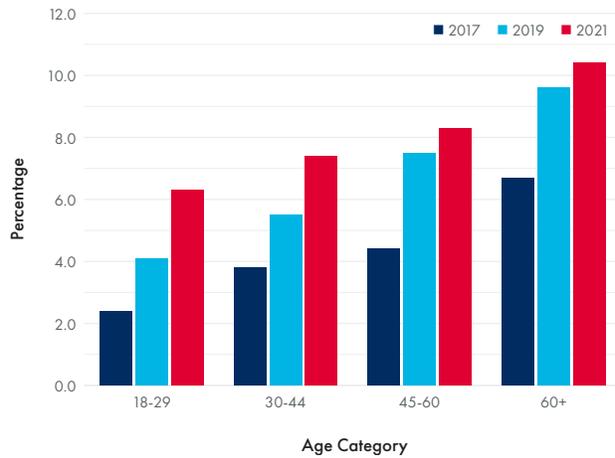
doubled from 3.1 percent to 7.5 percent. Although disparities remain, the comparatively larger percentage increases among people of color resulted in the most racially diverse pool of voucher users since the program began in 2017.

**Figure 6: Participation Rates by Household Income Category**



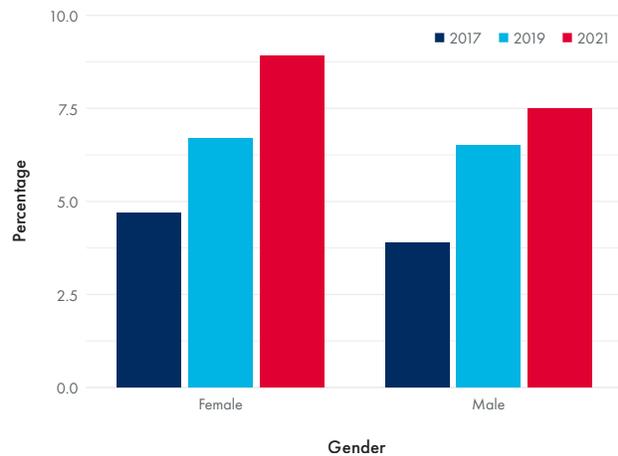
Participation in the Democracy Voucher Program remains highest for more affluent voters. In 2021 about 9% of residents with incomes above \$100,000 used a voucher while about 7.7% of the lowest-income residents did so. Still, while higher-income households remain more likely to participate overall, the program showed steady increases in participation among households with lower incomes. Among households with the lowest incomes (< \$30,000), participation nearly doubled from 4 percent in 2017 to 7.7 percent in 2021. Among those with incomes between \$30,000 and \$50,000, participation rose from 4.6 percent to 7.9 percent. Overall, the participation gap between the highest and lowest income categories was more even in 2021 than in 2019, but slightly more unequal than the program’s first cycle in 2017.

**Figure 7: Participation Rates by Age**



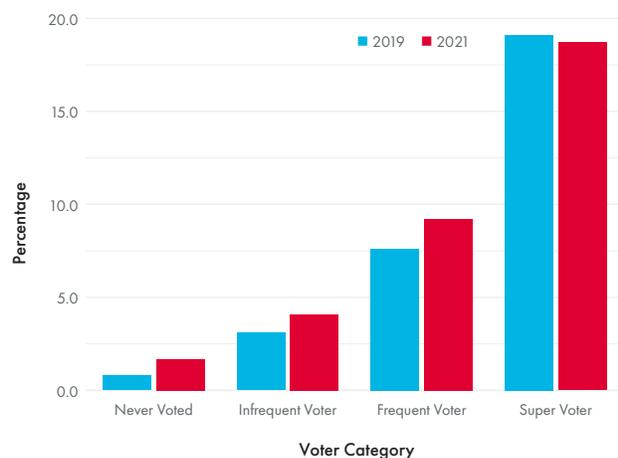
Participation in the Democracy Voucher program rose among all age groups between 2017 and 2021, but it rose most significantly among Seattleites between 18-29 and 30-44. For those 18-29, participation rose from 2.4 to 6.3 percent. For those 30-44, participation rose from 3.8 to 7.4 percent. Even with these gains, the oldest Seattle residents were the most likely to participate in the program. About 10.4 percent of Seattle residents aged 60 or older used their vouchers in 2021. Again, however, the participation gap between the youngest and oldest shrank between 2017 and 2021 with the oldest voters nearly three times as likely to participate as the youngest voters in 2017, but only 1.65 times more likely in 2021.

**Figure 8: Participation Rates by Gender**



In the 2021 election, women participated in the voucher program at a significantly higher rate than men.<sup>3</sup> Nearly 9 percent of women used their vouchers compared to 7.5 percent of men. This pattern in voucher use mimics trends among voters where women are now consistently more likely to vote than men (Igielnik 2020).

**Figure 9: Participation Rates by Frequency of Past Voting**



Seattle residents who regularly vote in elections – those described as Frequent Voters and Super Voters – remain the most likely to participate in the Democracy Voucher program.<sup>4</sup> In 2021, nearly 19 percent of Super Voters and 9 percent of Frequent Voters gave their vouchers, suggesting that participation remains concentrated among those already engaged in Seattle politics. However, the program saw growth in participation among infrequent voters and those who had never previously participated in Seattle elections. The participation rate rose from 3.1 to 4.1 percent among infrequent voters. It rose from 0.8 percent to 1.7 percent for those who had never voted before.

### *Section 3: Demographic Profiles*

In this section, we compare the demographic profiles of democracy voucher users to registered voters, 2021 general election voters, and cash donors. For cash donors, we distinguish between donors who made a qualifying contribution to a candidate and cash donors who contributed outside of the qualifying period or over the qualifying limit for program participants. We use registered and active voters as a benchmark to judge the efficacy of the program. That is, the program should push vouchers users to resemble the Seattle electorate rather than cash donors.

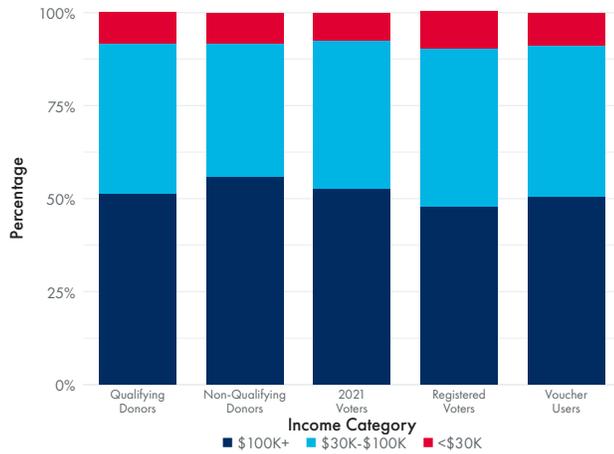
In past cycles, the program has shown promising gains in the representation of people of color, younger, and lower-income Seattle residents. In the first cycle of the program,

<sup>3</sup> As of 2021, there were too few non-binary individuals listed in the voter file to meaningfully distinguish this category.

<sup>4</sup> These classifications are based on the number of primary and general elections voted in since registering.

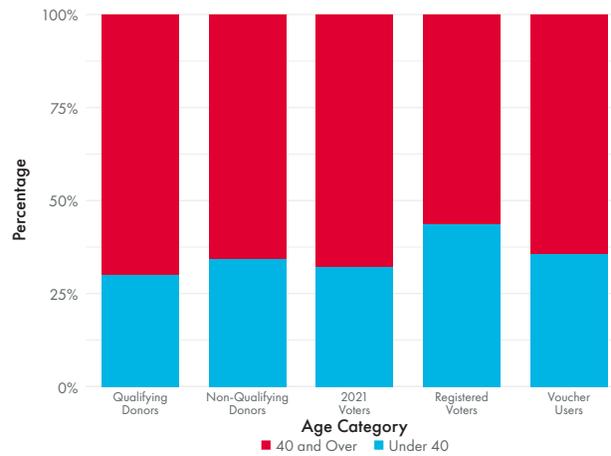
voucher users were considerably more diverse than cash donors at large (Heerwig and McCabe 2018; McCabe and Heerwig 2019). In 2019, voucher users were more representative than cash donors who made contributions over \$25 (Heerwig and McCabe 2020).

**Figure 10: Income Comparisons for Cash Donors, Voters and Voucher Users**



Voucher users in 2021 very closely mirrored the population of registered voters in Seattle by income category. We find that the lowest-income Seattleites are slightly overrepresented among voucher users compared to registered voters. Conversely, the highest-income residents are underrepresented among voucher users with very few significant differences across other income categories. Qualifying donors are slightly less representative than voucher users overall. For cash donors outside the qualifying period, we find that higher-income residents are slightly overrepresented.

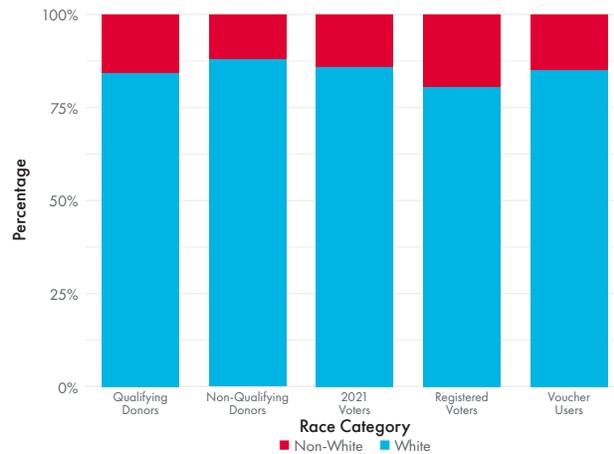
**Figure 11: Age Comparisons for Cash Donors, Voters and Voucher Users**



In Figure 11, we examine the age distribution of voters, democracy voucher users and cash donors. We find that individuals under the age of 40 are slightly underrepresented relative to registered voters but quite similar to active voters. Notably, those over 60 years of age were roughly equal as a share of both voucher users and registered voters. In past cycles of the program, those over 60 have been consistently overrepresented among voucher users.

Here, we also note some interesting patterns among cash donors. Those under 40 were about equally likely to make a non-qualifying cash contribution in 2021 as to use a democracy voucher. In fact, non-qualifying cash donors in Seattle’s 2021 municipal elections also closely approximate the age profile of active voters. This may partly be a consequence of the voucher program itself as Seattleites become more comfortable with and engaged in local elections. On the other hand, other factors such as the rise of Internet fundraising could also play into this pattern.

**Figure 12: Race Comparisons for Cash Donors, Voters and Voucher Users**



While past iterations of the Democracy Voucher program have reduced the racial contribution gap, the 2021 cycle has come within striking distance of eliminating it completely. In 2021, people of color were as likely to vote as to use a voucher. They were also slightly less likely to use a democracy voucher than to be a registered voter. In other words, people of color were still underrepresented relative to registered voters but closely resembled the active electorate in Seattle. Compared to cash donors, vouchers users were more diverse with people of color comprising about 12% of non-qualifying cash donors but 15% of voucher users.

## *Conclusion: Looking Ahead to 2023*

One of the central goals of the Seattle Democracy Voucher program has been to improve representational equality for communities typically marginalized within the campaign finance system. After three elections with the program, Seattle has made significant strides toward realizing this goal. Although program participation remains uneven across key sociodemographic groups, the 2021 election cycle reduced many of these gaps, especially as the program saw large participation increases for people of color and younger residents. As the program has matured, the pool of voucher users has also come to more closely resemble active and registered voters.

The representational gains made in 2021 may have been driven, in part, by the high-profile nature of the open seat mayoral and at-large city council seats being contested, as well as the diverse slate of candidates that ran for each office. If this is the case, it will be crucial for grassroots mobilization efforts to sustain these participatory gains in 2023 when seven districted city council seats will be on the ballot.

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