

Memo

To: Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission

From: Wayne Barnett

Date: February 6, 2019

Re: Debates

Law and Rules

SMC 2.04.630 provides in relevant part as follows:

To seek qualification [for the Democracy Voucher Program], the candidate shall file with the Commission...a pledge attesting to the candidate's intent to participate, asserting that the candidate shall timely file or has filed a declaration of candidacy for the office indicated, and that the candidate shall comply with applicable campaign laws and the following:

1. Taking part in at least three debates (as defined by the Commission) or similar public events for primary and general elections each (although the Commission may waive or reduce this requirement for good cause);

In December 2016, the Commission defined a debate as follows: “A debate is a live event, open to the general public, at which all the candidates in a particular race have an opportunity to respond to questions. Each candidate must be given an equal opportunity to participate.”

Issue

In the process of evaluating the Democracy Voucher Program after the 2017 elections, staff concluded that the definition of “debate” adopted by the Commission could necessitate debates that would be of limited value to the voting public. Had the mayor’s race been part of the Program in 2017, participating candidates would have been required to participate in three debates to which all 21 mayoral candidates had been invited. If a debate were scheduled to last three hours, each candidate would conceivably have less than ten minutes at the microphone. Such a format seems unlikely to serve the purpose of a debate, making it unlikely that organizations would be willing to sponsor such forums.

One of the touchstones of the voucher program is that candidates must show broad community support to participate. Staff proposes that candidates similarly be required to show some minimal community support to be required invitees at debates. (To be clear, staff is not attempting to dictate how private organizations organize their debates, nor is it freeing public agencies from the requirement that all candidates be invited to participate in debates that take place in City facilities. It is proposing narrowing the definition of debate so that Democracy Voucher candidates can participate in debates that organizations will sponsor, and candidates and the public are more likely to attend.)

Staff recommends that candidates for City and Council and City Attorney be required to have 50 contributors in order to be required attendees at debates, and candidates for Mayor be required to have 100 contributors in order to be required attendees. In the 2015 City Council elections, in which all nine seats were on the ballot, 33 candidates would have met the threshold, and 14 would not. The largest debates would have featured five candidates, and the smallest would have featured two.

In the 2017 City Council and City Attorney elections, eleven candidates would have met the threshold and six would not. In the 2017 Mayoral election, eight candidates would have met the threshold and 13 would not.