

# Democracy Voucher Program 2019 Election Cycle Evaluation

**Presentation to the Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission  
August 5, 2020**

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# Objectives

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- Evaluate the effectiveness with which the DVP is achieving the four goals identified in Initiative 122:
  - High rates of candidate participation
  - Democracy and accountability
  - Heavy utilization of vouchers by those who have not previously donated to Seattle political campaigns
  - High public satisfaction
- Evaluate the potential impacts of several program design changes which have been considered by the SEEC
- Provide recommendations to the SEEC

# Data Sources

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- DVP program records
- SEEC and King County elections results
- Interviews with candidates and campaign staff
- Survey of candidates and campaign staff
- Survey of democracy voucher users
- Survey of the Seattle residents

# Achievement of DVP Goals

Goal 1: High rates of  
candidate participation

# Candidate participation in the DVP

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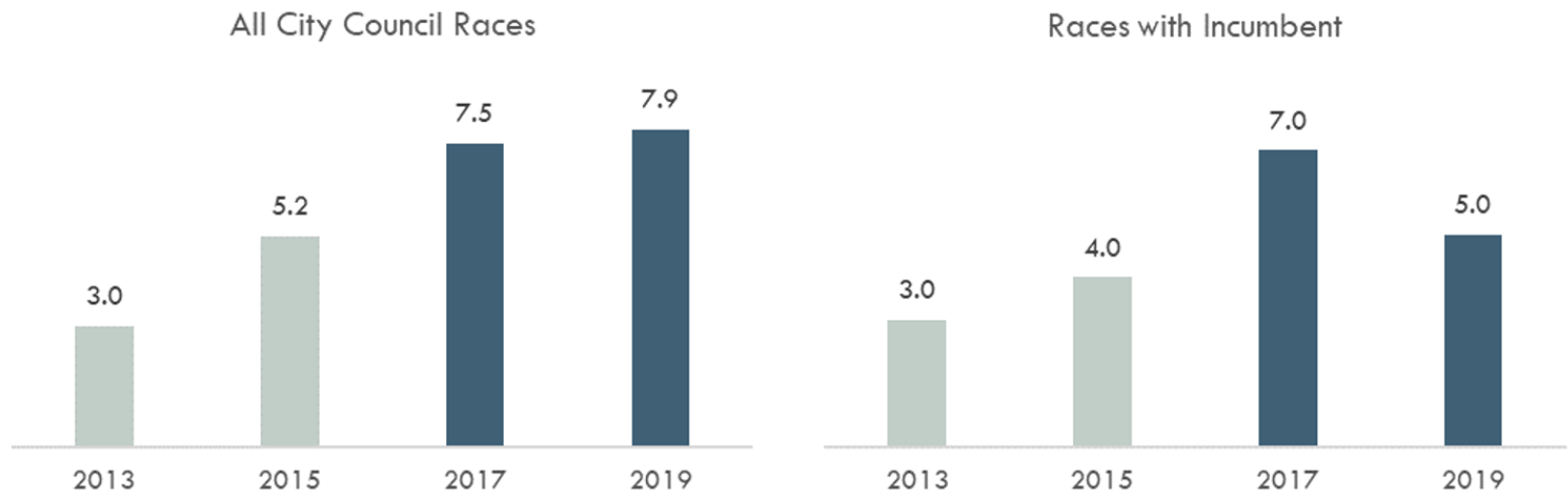
- 53 out of 55 Seattle city council candidates on the primary ballot pledged to participate in the DVP.
- 35 candidates completed the qualifying process and accessed nearly \$2.5 million in funding.
- Candidates and campaign staff generally found the support, resources, and informational materials from SEEC to be helpful.

# Goal 2: Democracy and Accountability

# Number of candidates

- City Council races have attracted more candidates since the introduction of the DVP

**Exhibit 5. Average number of candidates per city council position on primary election ballot**



*Note: Election cycles in blue indicate that the DVP was available to candidates.*

*Source: SEEC, 2020; BERK, 2020.*

# Candidate diversity

- Increase in total candidates who are women and persons of color between 2015 and 2019
- Percentage shares remained mostly stable

Exhibit 7. Whether city council candidates identify as a Person of Color, 2015 and 2019

	2015 CAMPAIGN CYCLE (9 ELECTION CONTESTS)		2019 CAMPAIGN CYCLE (7 ELECTION CONTESTS)	
Identification as person of color*	Count	Percent of total	Count	Percent of Total
Person of color*	6	16%	11	20%
Not identified as person of color**	31	84%	44	80%

Notes: \*Person of Color includes people who have self-identified or have been identified in reputable news outlets as being of a race other than white alone or of Hispanic/Latino ethnicity.

\*\* Includes anyone whose race is identified as white non-Hispanic/Latino or not identified in candidate statements and reputable news sources.

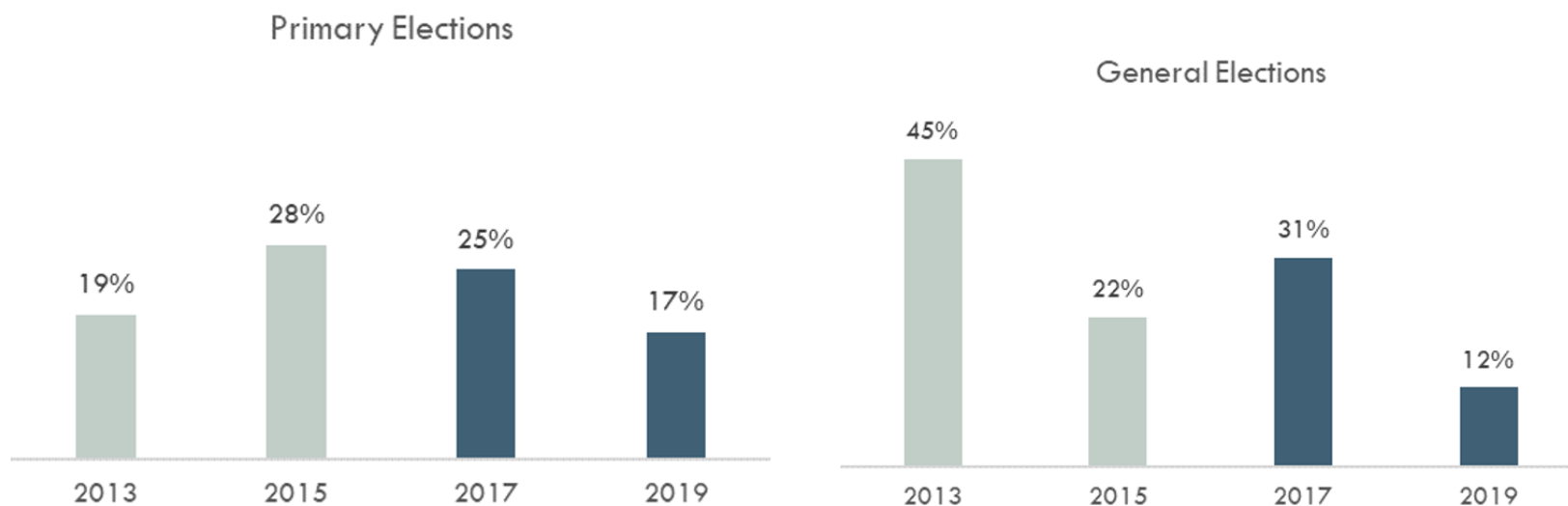
Source: BERK, 2020.



# Margin of victory

- 2019 had the smallest average margin of victory in city council elections among the last four cycles.

Exhibit 8. Average margin of victory in city council races

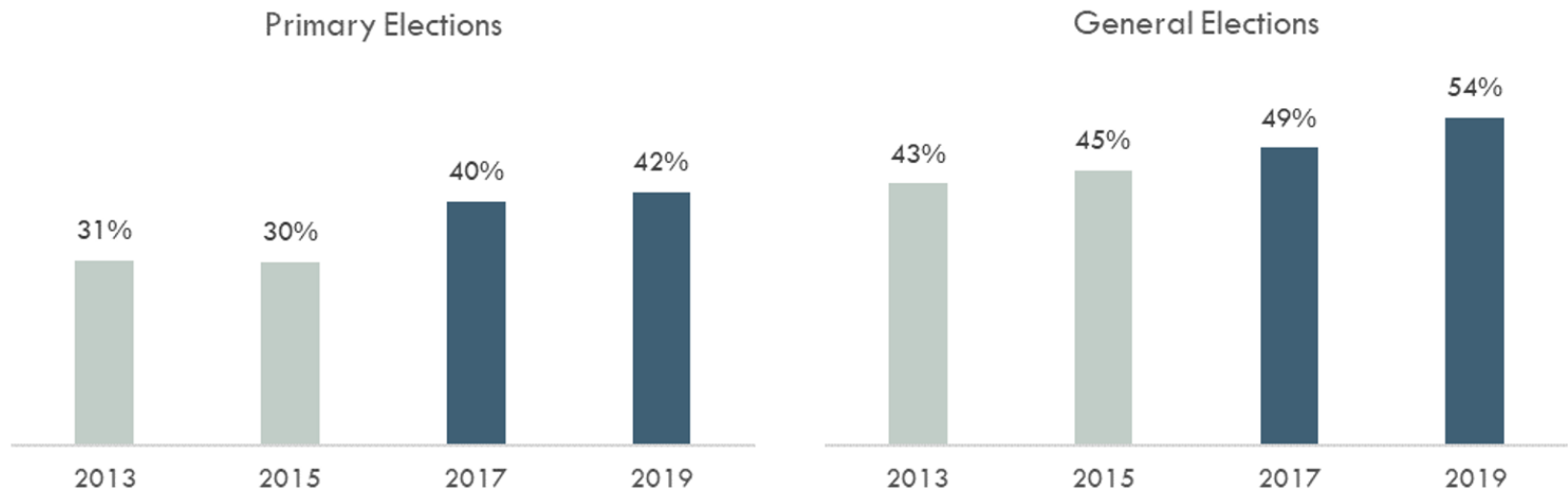


Note: Margin of victory is percentage share of votes cast for the winning candidate minus those cast for second-place finisher.  
Source: SEEC, 2020; BERK, 2020.

# Voter turnout

- Voter turnout for city council elections has steadily increased during the past four cycles.
- Big jump in turnout for primary elections following DVP

**Exhibit 9. Average percentage of registered voters who cast a ballot in city council races**



Source: SEEC, 2020; BERK, 2020.

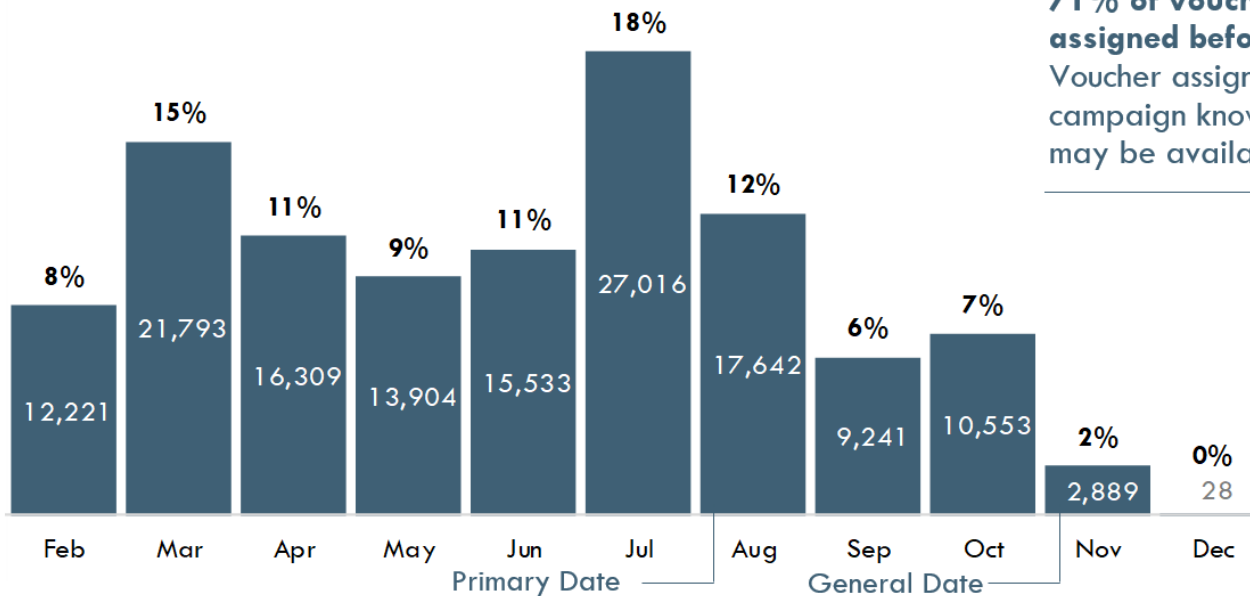
Goal 3: Heavy  
utilization of vouchers by  
those who have not  
previously donated to  
Seattle political  
campaigns

# Resident participation in the DVP

- **Over 38,000** Seattle residents used their vouchers
- **83%** increase compared to 2017 election cycle

Exhibit 22. Total vouchers received by month, 2019

**147,129 Vouchers Returned**



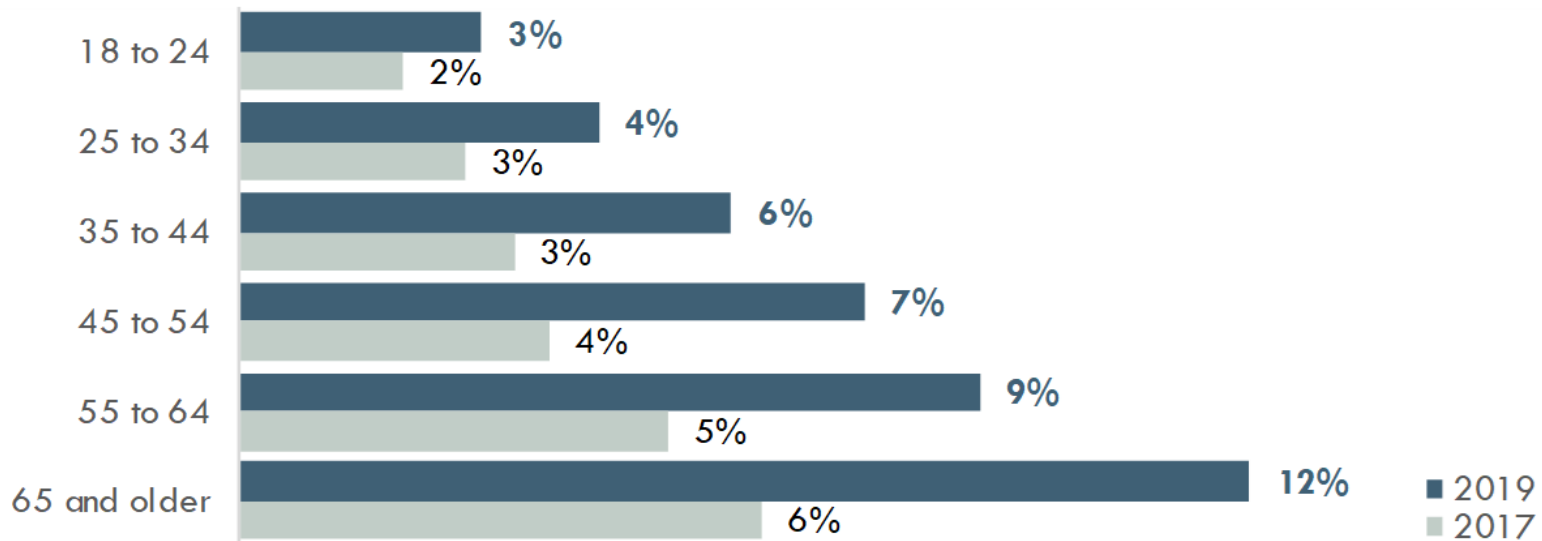
**71% of vouchers were received and assigned before the primary election.** Voucher assignment represents when a campaign knows what voucher funds may be available to their campaign.

Sources: SEEC, 2020; BERK Consulting, 2020.

# Voucher return rates by age group

- About **8%** of Seattle residents who were issued vouchers used them to support candidates.
- Voucher use rates varied significantly by age group

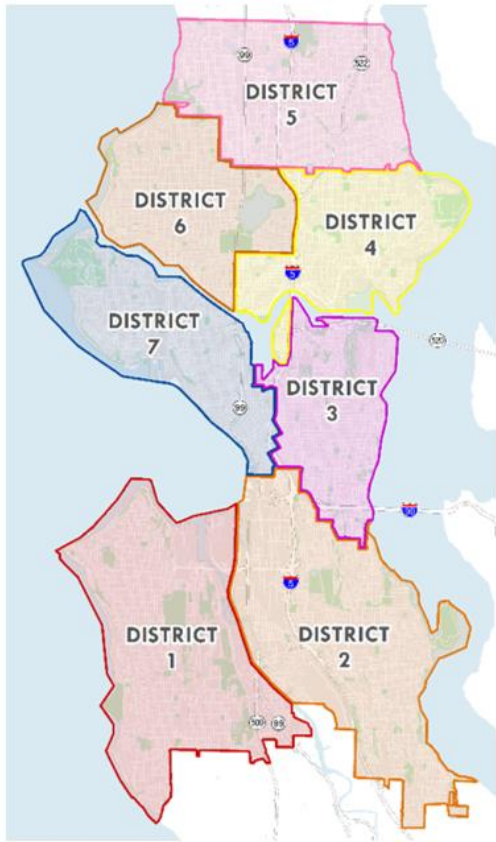
**Exhibit 21. Voucher use rates by age group, 2017 and 2019**



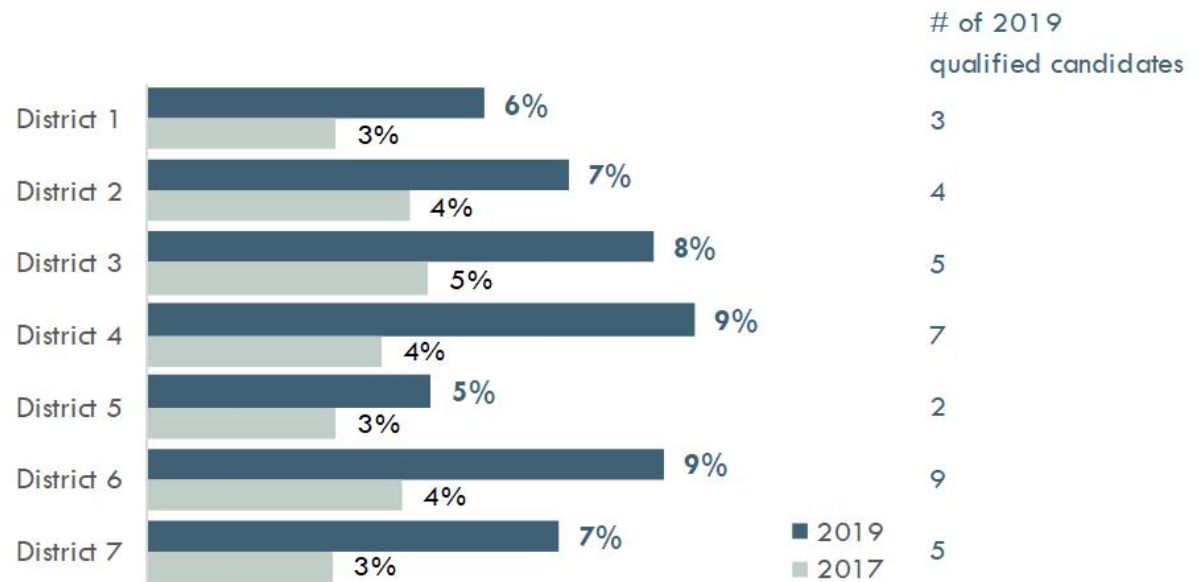
Sources: SEEC, 2020; BERK, 2020.

# Voucher return rates by district

Exhibit 20. Voucher response rates by City Council district, 2017 and 2019



Percentage of issued vouchers returned to SEEC by District



Sources: SEEC, 2020; BERK, 2020.

## Participation by residents not previously engaged in local elections

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- **37%** of surveyed voucher users say they had not contributed to a political campaign within past year.
- Candidates point to significant challenges engaging residents in poor and marginalized communities.
  - Language barriers
  - Cultural barriers
  - Lack of resources for qualifying donations
- So the path of least resistance for a candidate continues to be reaching out to residents who are already engaged in local politics.

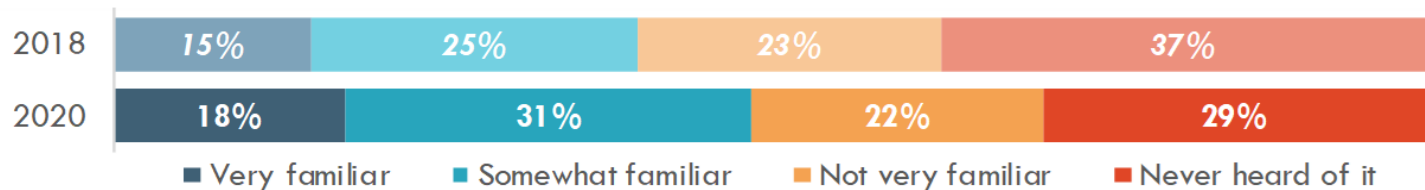
# Goal 4: High public satisfaction



# Familiarity with the DVP

- **Over half** of respondents in the Seattle Resident Survey said they are “very familiar” or “somewhat familiar” with the DVP.
- Familiarity is up compared to a previous survey in 2018

Exhibit 46. Seattle residents' familiarity with the DVP, 2018 compared to 2020

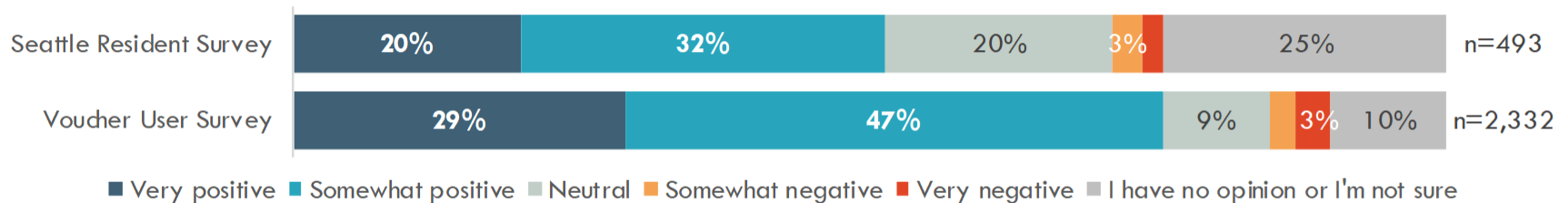


Source: BERK, 2020.

# Belief that DVP is having a positive impact

- **A majority** of Seattle residents believe the DVP is having a positive impact on local elections
- **Less than 5%** of residents believe it is having a negative impact
- Voucher users are significantly more likely to believe the program is having a positive impact

**Exhibit 1. Survey respondents' beliefs about the impacts of the DVP on local elections in Seattle**



Source: BERK, 2020.

# Recommendations for program changes under consideration

# Should the voucher mailing date be moved?

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No

- There is not strong support for moving the date among any group surveyed.
- Candidates need the time to solicit vouchers and raise enough funds to develop a feasible candidacy.

# Should the total value of vouchers provided to each resident be reduced?

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No

- This idea is not popular among any group, even after explaining how this could potentially enable more residents to participate in funding campaigns.
- Reducing value would risk the perception that the SEEC is devaluing the voice that Seattle residents can have in local elections.

# Should spending limits be raised or eliminated?

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No

- The idea was unpopular among voucher users and Seattle residents. Candidates and campaign staff were split.
- Some candidates expressed concerns about a lack of clarity, predictability, and transparency with regards to the process by which the SEEC decides to release from spending limits.

# Should the SEEC continue allowing vouchers to be given to candidates outside of their home district?

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Yes

- Voucher users expressed strong support:
  - “Our council ultimately decides policy and outcomes that have a collective impact on our entire city, so it should be appropriate for all of us to have the power to invest in candidates we are unable to vote for but who may need resources to power their campaigns.”
  - “My demographic is more represented in certain other districts than in my own. I would like to support candidates who represent me, even if they aren't candidates directly elected by my neighbors.”

# Other recommendations to the SEEC



# Conduct a usability assessment of the DVP from candidate perspective

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- Many new candidates, including candidates of color, described a very steep learning curve and lack of clarity about DVP rules and resources available.
- An independent usability assessment of the DVP could help to better align it with the needs of candidates who are new to the political process.
- The assessment would include:
  - Information resources
  - Trainings
  - Procedures for gathering and submitting qualifying signatures and donations
  - Redeeming vouchers
  - Special scenarios such as the need for the SEEC to issue a clarification of rules during an election contest

# Conduct a usability assessment of the DVP from resident perspective

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- Seattle residents have diverse perspectives, values, and needs that shape how they understand the DVP and its relevance to their own lives.
- The SEEC is funding CBOs to conduct culturally-sensitive outreach in native languages with immigrant communities and others who are not traditionally engaged in local politics.
- Build on this work, by identifying opportunities to make the program itself more usable to residents who bring diverse cultural perspectives, backgrounds, and understandings.

# Increase marketing of Democracy Voucher mailing day

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- A strong majority of voucher users learned about the program when they received vouchers in the mail.
- A coordinated marketing strategy focused on mailing day can help raise the profile of the DVP and alert residents to keep their eyes out for the mailer.
  - Advertising; Earned media; CBO outreach
- Many candidates asked for SEEC to do more to raise awareness of campaigns participating in the DVP. This could be incorporated into a mailing day marketing campaign.