

Communication from Public

Name: Tom Latkowski

Date Submitted: 05/25/2023 07:58 PM

Council File No: 23-0359

Comments for Public Posting: Dear Los Angeles City Council, I am Tom Latkowski, a Policy Organizer at the Democracy Policy Network, the co-founder of Los Angeles for Democracy Vouchers, and the author of “Democracy Vouchers: How bringing money into politics can drive money out of politics.” I am submitting this expert testimony to comment on and endorse the passage of Motion 23-0359. In 2015, Seattle voters passed Initiative 122, also known as “Honest Election Seattle,” with the goal of increasing the number of donors to local campaigns and increasing the number of candidates who run for office. The initiative instructed the Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission to give every eligible Seattle resident four vouchers worth \$25 each, which they could contribute to local campaigns. Seattle’s democracy vouchers program also includes eligibility rules for candidates who accept democracy vouchers, such as requirements for public debate attendance and overall campaign spending limits. The program has been used in each election cycle since passage, most recently in 2021. Multiple studies have found the program to be effective at expanding the pool of donors. In the 2013 mayoral race (the last prior to the implementation of democracy vouchers), just 1.49% of Seattle residents made any contribution to a local campaign. By 2021 (the first cycle in which Seattle mayoral candidates were eligible to receive democracy vouchers), this number had risen once to 7.59% — a five-fold increase from before the program was enacted. What’s more, Seattle donors are more reflective of the city’s demographics by race, income, and age than before the implementation of democracy vouchers. Currently, most elected officials in Seattle ran for office using democracy vouchers, including members of both political parties. While it is difficult to precisely determine which candidates would not have run for office without the program, most experts agree that the program has increased the number of candidates who run for office. Indeed, some candidates have publicly touted the program as key to their decision to run for office. Democracy vouchers have proven effective for political campaigns, even for those which are opposed by large special interest groups. One relevant case is the 2019 election cycle, in which seven Seattle City Council seats were up for election. In the 2019 cycle, Amazon and other outside groups spent millions of dollars opposing certain candidates,

leading some to question whether candidates running with democracy vouchers would remain viable. Despite this, six of the seven winning candidates were those who had run with democracy vouchers, while only one winning candidate was supported by Amazon. Seattle has shown democracy vouchers to be an effective campaign finance model to expand the pool of donors, increase the set of candidates who can run for office, and reduce the influence of big money in politics. I encourage you to pass Motion 23-0359, which would instruct the Chief Legislative Analyst to study the impact of a similar program in Los Angeles. Thank you for considering this important legislation. Please feel free to contact me if I can be of assistance in any way. Tom Latkowski Democracy Policy Network, Los Angeles for Democracy Vouchers

Dear Los Angeles City Council,

I am Tom Latkowski, a Policy Organizer at the Democracy Policy Network, the co-founder of Los Angeles for Democracy Vouchers, and the author of “Democracy Vouchers: How bringing money into politics can drive money out of politics.” I am submitting this expert testimony to comment on and endorse the passage of Motion 23-0359.

In 2015, Seattle voters passed Initiative 122, also known as “Honest Election Seattle,” with the goal of increasing the number of donors to local campaigns and increasing the number of candidates who run for office.¹ The initiative instructed the Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission to give every eligible Seattle resident four vouchers worth \$25 each, which they could contribute to local campaigns. Seattle’s democracy vouchers program also includes eligibility rules for candidates who accept democracy vouchers, such as requirements for public debate attendance and overall campaign spending limits. The program has been used in each election cycle since passage, most recently in 2021.

Multiple studies have found the program to be effective at expanding the pool of donors. In the 2013 mayoral race (the last prior to the implementation of democracy vouchers), just 1.49% of Seattle residents made any contribution to a local campaign.² By 2021 (the first cycle in which Seattle mayoral candidates were eligible to receive democracy vouchers), this number had risen once to 7.59% — a five-fold increase from before the program was enacted. What’s more, Seattle donors are more reflective of the city’s demographics by race, income, and age than before the implementation of democracy vouchers.

Currently, most elected officials in Seattle ran for office using democracy vouchers, including members of both political parties.³ While it is difficult to precisely determine which candidates would not have run for office without the program, most experts agree that the program has increased the number of candidates who run for office. Indeed, some candidates have publicly touted the program as key to their decision to run for office.

Democracy vouchers have proven effective for political campaigns, even for those which are opposed by large special interest groups. One relevant case is the 2019 election cycle, in

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<https://www.seattle.gov/democracyvoucher/about-the-program/honest-elections-seattle-initiative#:~:text=In%20November%202015%2C%20Seattle%20voters,typically%20financed%20for%20Seattle%20candidates.>

²

<https://www.seattle.gov/documents/Departments/EthicsElections/DemocracyVoucher/Program%20Data/Reports/2021%20Seattle%20Democracy%20Voucher%20Report.pdf>

³ <https://www.seattle.gov/democracyvoucher/program-data>

which seven Seattle City Council seats were up for election. In the 2019 cycle, Amazon and other outside groups spent millions of dollars opposing certain candidates, leading some to question whether candidates running with democracy vouchers would remain viable.⁴ Despite this, six of the seven winning candidates were those who had run with democracy vouchers, while only one winning candidate was supported by Amazon.

Seattle has shown democracy vouchers to be an effective campaign finance model to expand the pool of donors, increase the set of candidates who can run for office, and reduce the influence of big money in politics. I encourage you to pass Motion 23-0359, which would instruct the Chief Legislative Analyst to study the impact of a similar program in Los Angeles.

Thank you for considering this important legislation. Please feel free to contact me if I can be of assistance in any way.

Tom Latkowski

Democracy Policy Network, Los Angeles for Democracy Vouchers





los angeles for
democracy
vouchers