

More Cities Want to Embrace ‘Democracy Vouchers’

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Following Seattle’s example, other cities want to give voters cash vouchers to donate to local candidates.

In 2017, Seattle rolled out “[democracy vouchers](#)”—a program through which it would give eligible residents vouchers totaling \$100 to donate to the local candidate of their choice. Candidates who opted in to the program had to agree to [strict guidelines](#) on how to spend the money they received. The idea behind the pilot was that giving the equivalent of money to constituents who don’t usually have the resources to support their candidates—pensioners and the homeless, for example—would spur greater political participation. And, ideally, it would also help mitigate the vast influence [wealthy campaign donors have on local elections](#).

Now, the idea is picking up speed in other cities, with [Albuquerque, New Mexico](#), and [Austin, Texas](#), planning to put it to vote in ballot initiatives come November.

Why? Well, for one, they see [Seattle’s program](#), approved in 2015 and funded through a [10-year property tax](#), as a success. At least by some measures, it has been: A recent analysis of the outcomes by two liberal policy organizations concluded that the initiative boosted participation among younger and lower-income voters, and also created a more ethnically diverse group of voters [in the local elections last year](#). Although a previous *Seattle Times* examination found that it was not successful in keeping [big money out of the election](#). An [analysis](#) by Jennifer Heerwig and Brian J. McCabe found that while it was true that the voucher users were significantly more economically diverse, they also reflected the overall political participation in the city: voucher use was greater for older, white, and middle- and high-income voters.

Yet low-income voters who did participate said they appreciated the opportunity: “It feels like I’m more a part of the system,” one voucher user told the *Seattle Times* in 2017. “People like me can contribute in ways that we never have before. We can participate in ways that Big Money always has.”

Albuquerque presents a particularly interesting site to replicate Seattle’s experiment. In 2005, this city was the second after Tucson to approve a mechanism to publicly finance local candidates, with [70 percent of voters in favor](#). Through this program, eligible candidates get \$1 per voter in their constituency, out of a fund carved out of the city budget every year. (To qualify, among other criteria, the candidates had to eschew private donations). They were also entitled to additional funds to compete with privately financed opponents, but that part of the program was [struck down](#) by the Supreme Court, in a lawsuit against a similar campaign finance law in Arizona in 2011.

Over time, it became increasingly unfeasible for publicly financed candidates in Albuquerque to compete with those who accepted money from big spenders. In 2017's election, private money played a huge role. Tim Keller—who is now mayor—was the only candidate who used the city's public financing mechanism, although, he, too, got outside help from an independent political financing group (the city's version of a PAC). That's one of the main reasons the coalition of local activists have been pushing for Albuquerque's version of "democracy vouchers," or "Burque Bucks" as they're being called: It will enable a candidate to be competitive relying solely on public money next time around, said Eric Griego, New Mexico state director of the Working Families Party, who has been advocating for campaign finance reform.

The other problem Griego sees in Albuquerque is that political participation does not reflect the demographics of the electorate. The city is 60 percent people of color and 40 percent white, but its city council is two-thirds white. And according to estimates by Common Cause, Working Families Party, and other members of the coalition advocating for reform, "fewer than 350 donors gave three quarters of all cash contributions, with the average from each individual amounting to about \$3,000."

"Every voter, every Albuquerque resident, should have an equal voice and that 350 people shouldn't be able to determine who the next mayor is," says Griego, who was a city councilor in 2005. "It should be the larger electorate—whether or not they can write a thousand dollar check."

"Burque Bucks," is a part of the fix, he adds. "We considered other proposals but this one seemed to be the right balance between making public finance candidates more viable and broadening the electorate," he said.

So far, Griego and other activists have collected the petition signatures required to qualify "Burque Bucks" as a ballot initiative. If they pass the rest of the procedural hurdles, it will be on the ballot come November. If it passes, the program will aim to give voters a \$25 voucher to donate to their publicly financed candidate—a quarter of what Seattle voters get.

"We're not anywhere near as wealthy as Seattle, we're not as big, and we're probably not as progressive," Griego said. "We've modified [the program] to fit the economics and demographics of Albuquerque."

Campaign finance reform became a key issue during the 2016 presidential election. It was elevated in large part by Democratic primary candidate Bernie Sanders, who was himself propelled by small, individual donations from across the country. That same year, South Dakota and Washington state passed versions of "democracy vouchers," as part of larger anti-corruption packages favored by voters. Both immediately received pushback, explains Vox's Lee Drutman. In the case of South Dakota, a judge blocked the ethics overhaul of which the vouchers were a part, and then the Republican state legislature ended up repealing it altogether.

Seattle's measure also faced legal obstacles after a libertarian law firm sued on behalf of

property owners. Citing Supreme Court precedent, it argued that the program was “grossly inefficient, wasted taxpayer money,” and violated the First Amendment because residents’ taxes were going to fund candidates they didn’t support. These arguments are along the lines of what Albuquerque activists are hearing from opponents, and what proponents of “democracy vouchers” have always come up against.

In a 2011 op-ed in *The New York Times*, for example, Lawrence Lessig, a professor of law at Harvard, vouched for democracy voucher programs saying, “It’s also my money, or your money, used to support the speech that we believe: this is not a public financing system that forces some to subsidize the speech of others.” In response, a Cato Institute blog post called his argument “old wine in new bottles, barely masking the fact that it puts the government in the business of promoting political speech.”

In the case of Seattle, lawyers and political experts predicted that the libertarian argument wasn’t likely to stand in court, and so far they’ve turned out to be right. In November 2017, a Superior Court judge upheld Seattle’s program, ruling that it was a “viewpoint neutral method” for achieving political participation. In other words, it did not violate free speech rights, but corrected for an existing imbalance.

“I happen to not believe money is speech, but if you believe money is speech then he who has more money has more speech,” Griego said.

Add to that the recent surge of progressive candidates like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in New York—whose campaign has also relied largely on small, individual campaign donations of less than \$200—and the stage is set for local efforts to reform campaign finance: People know it’s possible to beat the political machine.

The attempts to get “democracy vouchers” on the books in Albuquerque and Austin follow efforts by local governments including those in Maryland, Oregon, and California to tweak campaign finance at the local level. Even Missouri, a state that typically votes conservative, hopped on the bandwagon. In New York, there are calls to use the city’s ongoing charter revision to strengthen public financing mechanisms further. Given that campaign finance laws at the national level are already leaky, and may be further weakened in the future, activists are hopeful that change fans out from the city-level.

“A lot of the real reform on a lot of issues—but certainly in campaign finance—is happening at the local level,” Griego said.

**CORRECTION: An earlier version of this post attributed an analysis to the Brennan Center for Justice. While it was published on that site, the authors are Jennifer Heerwig and Brian J. McCabe.*