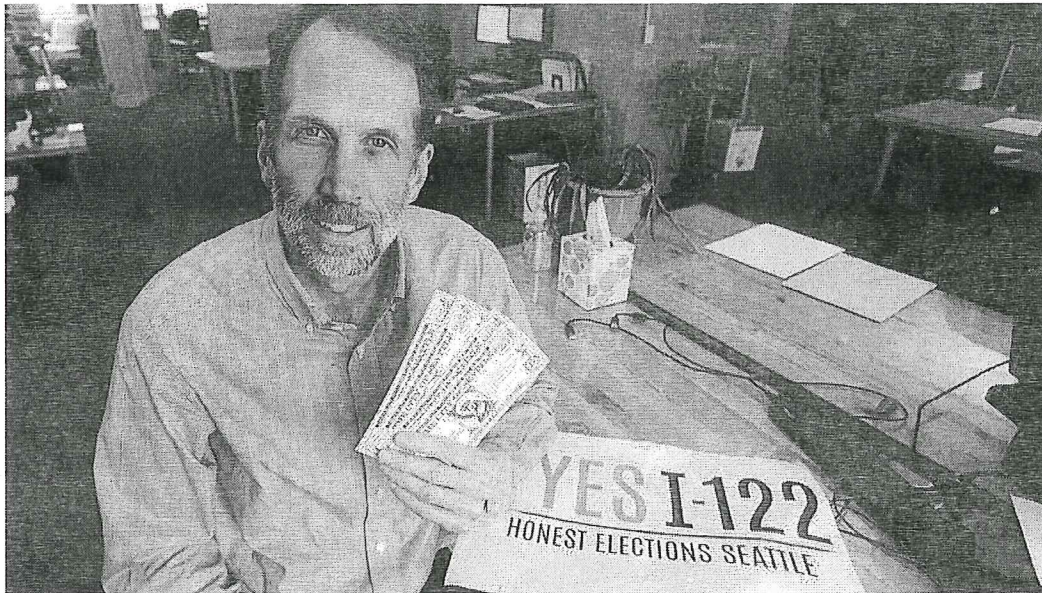


Power to the people: Seattle voters to get \$100 each for campaign donations

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff on 12.01.15

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Alan Durning, author of an initiative passed by Seattle, Washington, voters that created the nation's first voucher system for campaign contributions, poses for a photo in his office in Seattle while holding an artist's depiction of a possible design for the vouchers, Nov. 12, 2015. Photo: AP/Ted S. Warren

SEATTLE, Wash. — When it comes to elections, voting is a powerful way to make your voice heard. But one city is empowering people to have an effect using another tool — money. Seattle's government is giving residents \$100 each to dole out to candidates they want to see elected.

Voters in Seattle decided this month to adopt the nation's first voucher system for campaign contributions. A voucher is a type of coupon. The idea is to get people who don't normally donate to campaigns more involved in politics. The policy makes it easier for everyday people to influence politics and perhaps decrease the influence of big companies and wealthy individuals.

More Money From More People

"We're very eager to see how it works," said Michael Malbin, executive director of the Campaign Finance Institute in Washington, D.C. "One of the major problems people have with the political system is that it's financially controlled by too few people."

Malbin said that while nothing is going to stop wealthy people from making their own donations, this program will make them less powerful if more people everywhere are contributing money to campaigns.

Over time, the U.S. Supreme Court has relaxed restrictions on political donations. The looser rules have made it easier for companies and unions that represent workers to pledge large amounts of money to candidates for elected office.

Some people criticize the Supreme Court decisions. They see the efforts in Seattle and other plans to encourage public, individual donations as blunting the influence that companies can have when they donate to campaigns.

The Cost Of Democracy Coupons

A policy like this isn't cheap. Seattle's voters decided to tax themselves \$3 million a year - or up to \$6 million for a two-year election cycle. In exchange, each registered voter will receive \$100 - in the form of four vouchers, with each voucher, or coupon, worth \$25. Voters can donate the vouchers to candidates for mayor or city council.

The idea of campaign-contribution vouchers dates back to at least 1967. Congress passed an initiative that let voters check a box on their tax returns to donate \$1 to help pay for campaigns with public money.

Since then, it's become easier for everyday people to contribute to campaigns. Many cities and states now have some form of voluntary public funding.

Seattle's Voucher System May Spread

Election reformers hope to see Seattle's program copied around the country.

David Donnelly is president of Every Voice in Washington D.C. His group supported the proposals in Seattle. He said he expects the Seattle measure to spread. According to Donnelly, as many as eight states will likely consider similar measures in 2016, and place them on ballots. Then on election days, people can vote on them. Efforts are underway to put voucher systems on the ballot in South Dakota and Washington.

"There are people all over the country that are seeing these examples as beacons of hope to take big money out of politics and engage regular people in elections," Donnelly said. "It's an incredible, democratizing policy."

Critics Say Vouchers Open To Abuse

However, not everyone supports Seattle's new policy.

Robert Mahon, a former chairman of the city's Ethics and Elections Commission, argues that people will abuse the law. Mahon believes it will worsen the problem of "dark money" — where groups that receive money from rich people and companies spend it to influence elections. The problem is that these groups do not have to say who donates to them, and they can receive unlimited amounts of money.

"I fear it sets back the cause of campaign finance reform," he said.

Mahon and others also suggest that the vouchers might not benefit all candidates equally. Some claim the system will be advantageous to incumbents and well-known candidates who have a well-established campaign that can handle the money coming in. Critics of the policy also say the \$6 million that Seattle's tax will raise to pay for the donations won't be nearly enough to cover vouchers for all 419,000 of Seattle's registered voters.

There are also some exceptions in the law, and people wonder how effective it will actually be. The Seattle policy puts a limit on how much candidates can spend, but they can ask to be released from the spending limits. That would enable them to raise and spend more money from vouchers and other donations. It could be an unfair advantage.

Supporter Sees Help For More Candidates

Alan Durning is an author of the Seattle ballot measure. He supports the program. Incumbents have advantages in any election, he said. Giving lesser-known candidates public funding can only help their campaigns, Durning explained. The vouchers would help level the playing field, he believes.

In 2013, just 1.5 percent of Seattle voters made political contributions to local candidates. If the voucher system increases voter participation so much that more vouchers are needed, it will be a great problem to have, Durning said. If that's the case, he said it can be fixed by adjusting the value of the vouchers or the number issued. In other words, since not many people donate money to start with, this initiative might help more people get involved with campaigns, since it makes it easier for them to donate money to candidates of their choice.

"If we have the good fortune of voters being more eager to use vouchers than we expect, we can adjust the system," Durning said.

Quiz

- 1 Read the section "Critics Say Vouchers Open To Abuse." Why does the author include this section of the article?
- (A) to explain how the voucher system will not succeed
 - (B) to show how controversial the voucher system is in Seattle
 - (C) to highlight how much money influences politics
 - (D) to describe the potential drawbacks of the voucher system

- 2 Choose the paragraph from the section "The Cost of Democracy Coupons" that explains how Seattle's voucher system works.

- 3 Read the sentence from the article.

But one city is empowering people to have an effect using another tool — money.

Which answer choice could replace the word "empowering" WITHOUT changing the meaning of the sentence?

- (A) forcing
- (B) inspiring
- (C) paying
- (D) challenging

- 4 Read the sentence from the article.

"There are people all over the country that are seeing these examples as beacons of hope to take big money out of politics and engage regular people in elections," Donnelly said.

What does the phrase "beacons of hope" refer to in the article?

- (A) People are seeing vouchers systems as a way out of voting.
- (B) People are seeing voucher systems as a way to make money.
- (C) People are seeing vouchers systems as examples of why money shouldn't be involved in elections.
- (D) People are seeing vouchers systems as examples of how voting could be more fair in the future.