

DEMOCRACY



BITES FROM AROUND THE U.S.

AMID TRUMP'S TEARDOWN OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT, DESPAIR ABOUT THE FUTURE OF OUR DEMOCRACY IS UNDERSTANDABLE. WHILE THE THREATS ARE VERY REAL, WE CAN FIND HOPE IN INITIATIVES, PROGRAMS, AND LAWS FROM AROUND THE NATION BRINGING US CLOSER TO THE DEMOCRACY WE WANT.

WE CALL THESE STORIES "DEMOCRACY BITES." DIG IN!

★ HONEST ELECTIONS SEATTLE

In November 2015, citizens of Seattle, WA passed several campaign finance reforms targeting contribution limits and lobbying. They also enacted **Democracy Vouchers** where every voter receives 4 vouchers worth \$25 each. Voters can use the vouchers to contribute to a candidate's campaign should that candidate be registered for the program. To register, candidates have to commit to taking only public money. The impact was immediate; in 2017, **almost 90 percent of donors were new**. More and more candidates are joining the program, making races much more competitive and evening the electoral playing field so that people can run for office **without private financing**.

MAINE CLEAN ELECTIONS ACT ★

The 1996 **Maine Clean Elections Act** created a public funding system for candidates running for all state offices. Candidates who participate must follow three rules to qualify for public funds: show a certain level of grassroots support by collecting \$5 contributions from in-district voters, agree not to spend or raise private money, and limit spending to the amount received from the Maine Clean Elections fund. MCEA severs the connection between private money and public office, making it easier for average Mainers to run for office and, as a result, making the legislature **more representative**, paving the way for laws such as the Green New Deal for Maine. In 2015, Mainers voted to strengthen this program, and in 2024 Maine voted to cap individual contributions to super PACs at \$5,000, taking bold action to limit the corrupting influence of money in politics.

★ RANKED CHOICE VOTING

Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) is an electoral system where voters rank candidates in order of preference rather than selecting just one. If none of the candidates receive more than 50 percent of the votes, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated, and those votes are transferred to the voter's second choice. This process continues until one candidate has the majority. RCV ensures a **consensus-driven winner**, leading to a more representative outcome. Furthermore, it encourages third-party and independent voters to run for election and engages voters who are less likely to vote otherwise, reducing polarization. Maine and Texas use RCV for statewide voting, and it has also been implemented in **22 other states**.

★ CITIZEN ASSEMBLIES AND TOWN MEETING

Citizen assemblies have been proven to be successful in **revitalizing democracy** in communities across the globe. They allow citizens to participate in decision-making processes—fostering greater public awareness and engagement, both with complex issues and other citizens across the political spectrum. This process mimics “town hall meetings” and participants are chosen randomly, similar to jury-duty selection. European peers have used them effectively. In Ireland, citizen assemblies led to the legalization of both same-sex marriage and abortion.

One stateside example is the **“WA Climate Assembly.”** The State randomly selected citizens to openly discuss how to tackle climate change, and the results were stunning: The assembly agreed on nearly 150 recommendations, many of which **became pieces of legislation**. All recommendations needed at least 80 percent approval to pass, so the process was a true testament to how direct engagement brings citizens together.

New England town meeting operates similarly. Beginning in the 1630s, the town of Dorchester was the first to introduce these open, direct gatherings of citizens that became common by the 18th. Except a for moderator, there is no intermediary between the community and government. The challenge, though, is that town meetings typically function best in small communities. As populations grow, representative town meetings became the norm. However, today, efforts are underway to re-introduce open town meetings, where possible. **After 50 years**, the town of Lee in Western Massachusetts **recently switched back to town meetings**, motivated by popular demands of its 5,700 residents to have agency.

NEW YORK CAMPAIGN FINANCE PROGRAM ★

In 2022, New York State launched its Public Campaign Finance Program—the first state-level public campaign finance program since *Citizens United vs. FEC* (2010). NY candidates qualify for public financing if they meet a threshold of local support – matching donations of \$250 or less. The program **amplifies the smallest contributions** the most. There’s a match-rate of up to \$12-to-\$1 for assembly and senate races. In statewide races, donations can be matched up to \$6-to-\$1. This program has already proven successful: Within districts, small donor **participation has doubled**—putting greater power in the voter’s hands.

★ KATIE FAHEY: TACKLING GERRYMANDERING IN MICHIGAN

Gerrymandering means redrawing electoral boundaries to give a political party an advantage. This practice is arguably one of the most undemocratic tools preventing us from having a truly representative democracy. Michigan resident Katie Fahey took matters into her own hands to confront the problem. What started with a social media post turned into a **movement to create a commission** of 13 voters in charge of redrawing election maps. Their proposal to end partisan gerrymandering was approved by 61% of Michigan voters in 2018. And what a difference it’s made: Back in 2018, Democrats won 50 percent to 48 percent in popular vote in the Michigan Senate election, but Republicans won 22 seats and the Democrats received only 16. By 2022, after the commission’s new map, Democrats won the popular vote again 50 to 48, but this time it gave them 20 seats and Republicans got 18.