

Launching an Exhibit Through Challenging Times

Jackie Peterson

Stand Up Seattle: The Democracy Project

Museum of History
and Industry,
Seattle, Washington
(host museum)

November 27, 2020*
to March 28, 2021

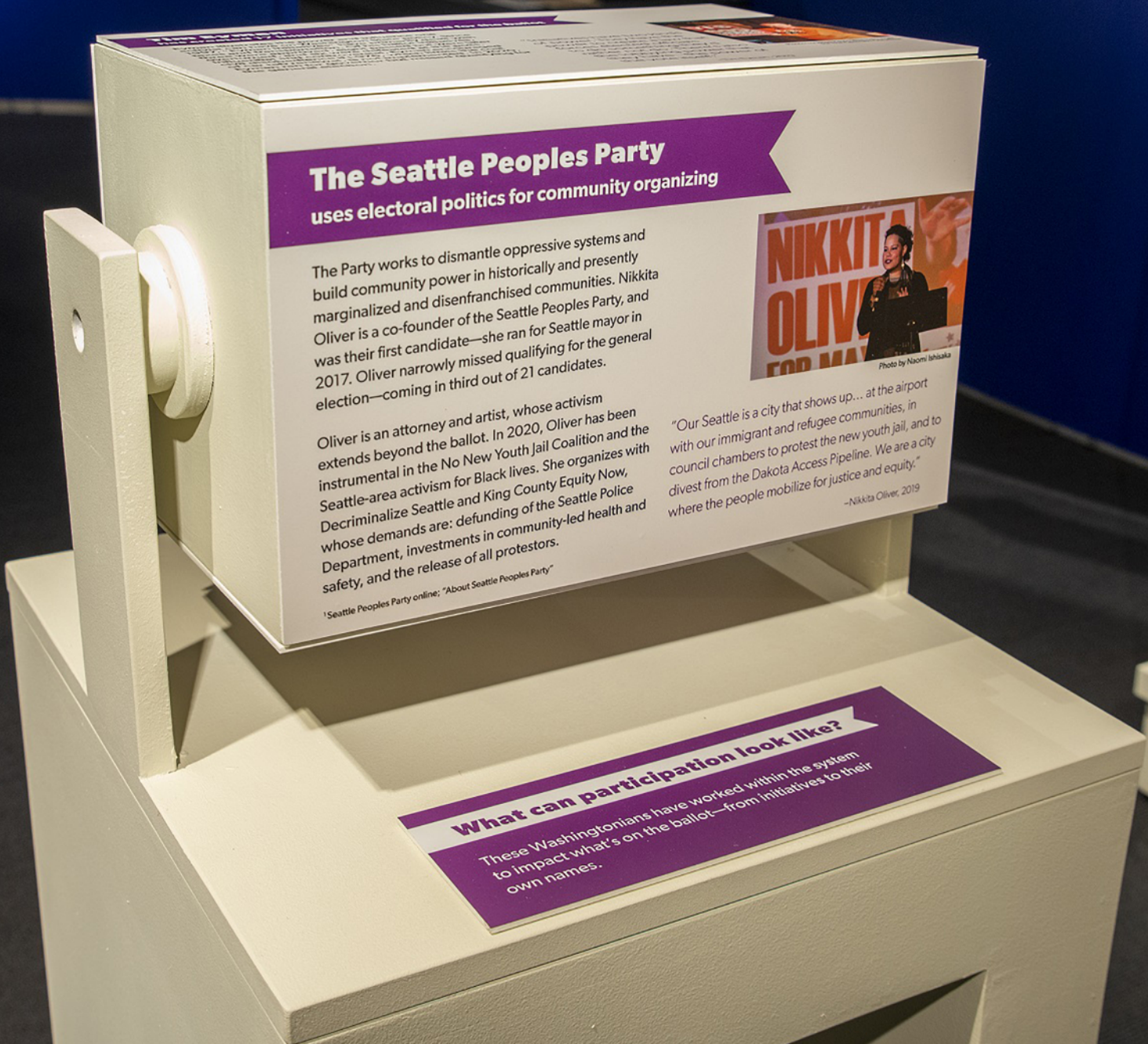
*The exhibition did not open publicly on this date due to statewide COVID-19 related restrictions. At the time of writing, these dates had not been updated.

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Museums – like most other public-serving industries – had to chart new paths forward when the COVID-19 pandemic set in. And, like public-serving industries, they were called to account after the summer 2020’s countless protests and uprisings demanding justice for the harm done to people and communities of color. As the pandemic wore on, a third crisis emerged: threats to American democracy from political extremism inside and outside the halls of the United States government. Throughout the year, museums were presented with countless opportunities to step into the role of civic institution. Yet in Seattle, few museums chose to directly address these collective crises in spite of all of them unfolding on most museums’ doorsteps.

One Seattle museum, though, chose to use our endangered democracy as a lens through which we might consider how to address the inequities that were laid bare throughout 2020. Although the Museum of History and Industry (MOHAI) had already planned an exhibition on American democracy for the spring of 2020, museum staff used the most pressing issues in the world to shape its final content. Although MOHAI had to navigate several obstacles throughout the development process, the resulting exhibition, *Stand Up Seattle: The Democracy Project*, was a powerful reminder that we the people still hold power if we can effectively use all the tools at our disposal.

An interactive gives visitors an opportunity to see who and what has appeared on Washington State's ballots over the years. Pushing down or up rotates the cube to reveal one of four stories.



The Seattle Peoples Party
uses electoral politics for community organizing

The Party works to dismantle oppressive systems and build community power in historically and presently marginalized and disenfranchised communities. Nikkita Oliver is a co-founder of the Seattle Peoples Party, and was their first candidate—she ran for Seattle mayor in 2017. Oliver narrowly missed qualifying for the general election—coming in third out of 21 candidates.



Photo by Naomi Ishiaka

Oliver is an attorney and artist, whose activism extends beyond the ballot. In 2020, Oliver has been instrumental in the No New Youth Jail Coalition and the Seattle-area activism for Black lives. She organizes with Decriminalize Seattle and King County Equity Now, whose demands are: defunding of the Seattle Police Department, investments in community-led health and safety, and the release of all protestors.

"Our Seattle is a city that shows up... at the airport with our immigrant and refugee communities, in council chambers to protest the new youth jail, and to divest from the Dakota Access Pipeline. We are a city where the people mobilize for justice and equity."

—Nikkita Oliver, 2019

¹Seattle Peoples Party online; "About Seattle Peoples Party"

What can participation look like?

These Washingtonians have worked within the system to impact what's on the ballot—from initiatives to their own names.



When Washington State's COVID-19 restrictions took effect in mid-March 2020, museums throughout the area closed in response without knowing when – or how – they might reopen. The Museum of History and Industry staff chose to devote their energy to ramping up virtual programs and launching its much-anticipated loan exhibition, *American Democracy: A Great Leap of Faith*. *American Democracy* was a collaborative presentation with the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Services (SITES) and MOHAI, with MOHAI providing supplemental local exhibition content. The exhibition was slated to open in April of 2020, but it became clear that pandemic-related closures in Washington would extend beyond April. SITES and MOHAI agreed that MOHAI would no longer host *American Democracy*.

Yet, the topics and themes of the Smithsonian exhibition were still relevant, as challenges to our democracy continued to unfold locally throughout the spring and summer. MOHAI exhibition staff members were committed to producing an exhibition that would gear visitors up for the upcoming presidential election and beyond. So *Stand Up Seattle: The Democracy Project* was born. In a few months, the MOHAI team pored over the Smithsonian exhibition, keeping what they believed were still good concepts and themes, and discarding the rest. The museum also engaged a diverse team of content advisors as well as existing community partners to build out an exhibition that would focus on democracy in Washington state and in the city of Seattle.

With a vision for the revamped exhibition laid out, MOHAI's next task was to find ways for visitors to access *Stand Up Seattle* while

its doors were shuttered indefinitely. The resulting effort was an online companion for the physical exhibition. While this digital component was not as robust as the physical exhibition, it was an invaluable resource. The online version of *Stand Up Seattle* took visitors through an introduction to the exhibition, the three key exhibition sections, and ended with links to view artifacts featured in the exhibition. There were a few interactive moments, mostly in the form of trivia questions and opportunities to respond to open-ended questions. Most importantly, though, there were links to numerous resources for taking action. I appreciated that the physical and digital exhibition broke down (both literally and graphically) ways everyone could participate: at an individual level, at a community level, and at a leadership level (fig. 1). While I was disappointed that media pieces and other interactives from the physical exhibition were not available online, the digital exhibition was approachable and easy to use.

Both the digital and physical exhibition began and ended with a central question: "How do you feel about participating in Washington State's democracy?" (fig. 2). Regardless of the response, *Stand Up Seattle* presented a deeper look into how visitors could become more engaged in the political process. While so many museums shied away from discussing "politics," it was refreshing to experience an exhibition that actively invited visitors *not* to be neutral bystanders. By focusing the exhibition on collective action rather than on a few individuals in positions of power (as many history museums typically do), *Stand Up Seattle* is an offering for everyday people to work toward a more inclusive democracy.

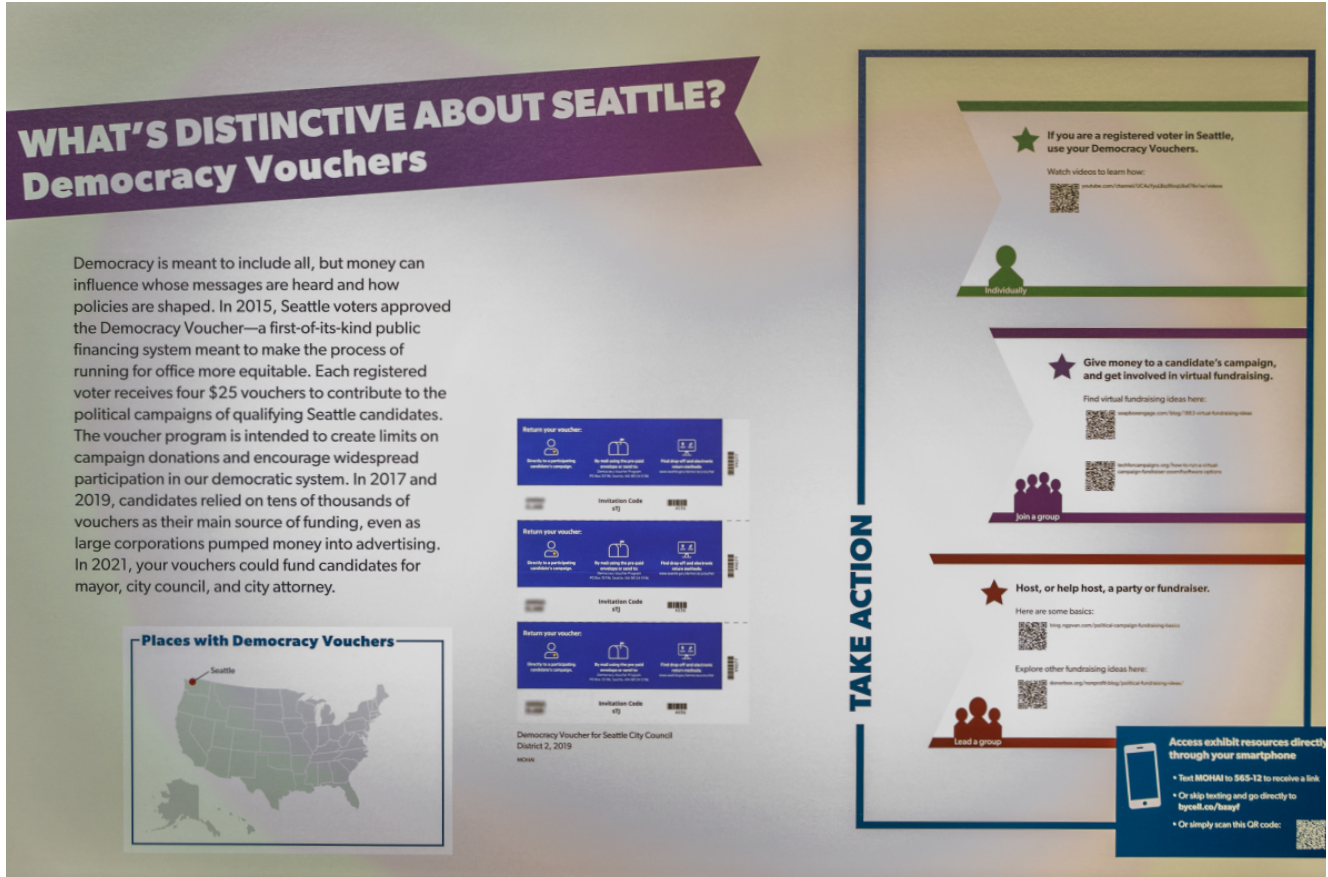


Fig. 1. A “Take Action” panel details the various levels at which people can get involved in understanding and changing the Electoral College.



Fig. 2. As visitors enter and exit the exhibition, they are asked to respond to this central question.



I planned to attend the public opening of *Stand Up Seattle* on November 27, 2020, but rising COVID-19 infection rates led to another round of closures for museums beginning Wednesday of that week. Thankfully, museum staff who planned to be working in the building during the closure generously allowed me to preview the exhibition. *Stand Up Seattle* occupies MOHAI’s temporary exhibition gallery, which is approximately 4,000 square feet. The exhibition is designed as a choose-your-own-adventure experience, dictated by the topic(s) that most interest visitors. One large gallery hosts most of the exhibition’s content, and a smaller, connected gallery is devoted completely to activities related to the exhibition’s themes and topics (fig. 3).

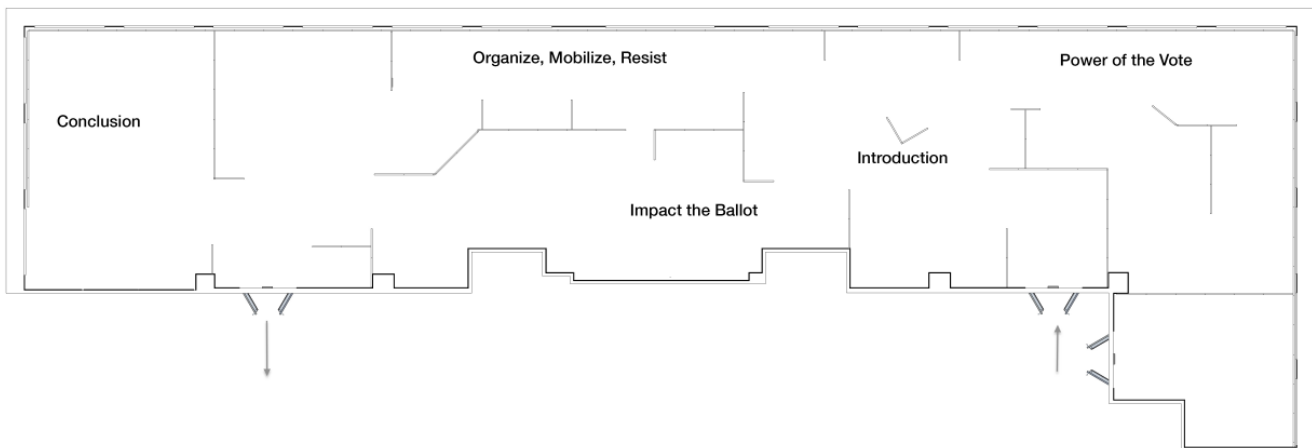
At the entrance to the large, main gallery, I was greeted with an overview of *Stand Up Seattle* and an explanation of the recurring iconography. Moving on from the entry alcove, I entered the central, introductory

section of the exhibition. Here, I gained some high-level historical context about the origins of our nation’s democracy, including a media piece from the Smithsonian exhibition about how America’s representative democracy works (fig. 4). This central area also included stories from Washington’s Indigenous communities and highlighted youth involvement (those under 18) in political action, with supporting artifacts from MOHAI’s collection for each.

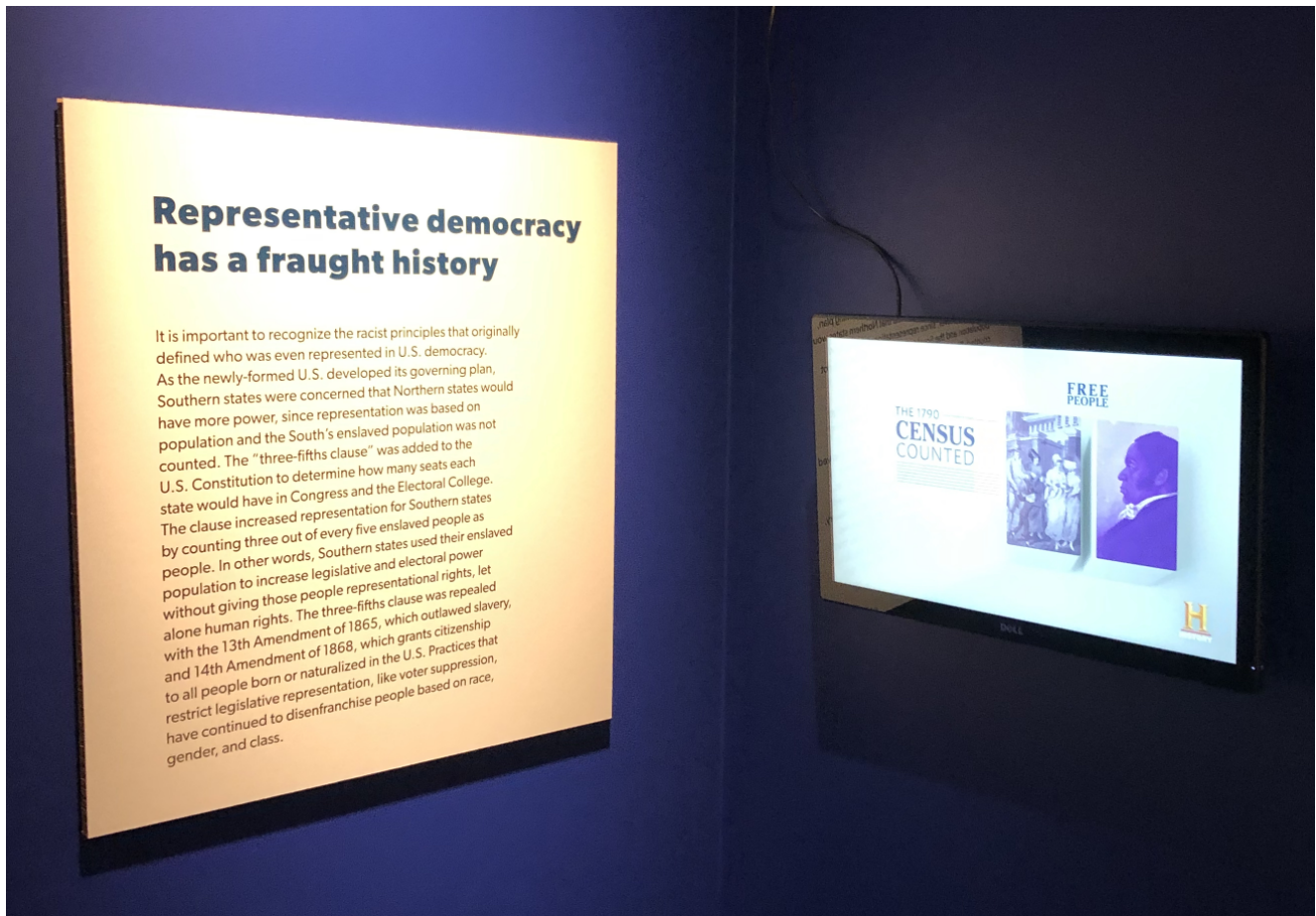
Three exhibit sections were connected to the central hub, each focused on a specific topic: “Power of the Vote,” “Impact the Ballot,” and “Organize, Mobilize, Resist.” In order to experience each gallery, you had to return and pass through the central hub. I appreciated both the nonlinear and nonchronological organization of the overall exhibition, which few history museums have done successfully. From this central space, visual cues and text gave me just enough direction that I could comfortably navigate without feeling lost.

Fig. 3.

Stand Up Seattle exhibition floor plan.



MUSEUM OF HISTORY AND INDUSTRY, SEATTLE, WA



I chose to explore “Power of the Vote” first, where I was pleasantly surprised to find that a key feature of this section dealt with registering to vote! Not only was I provided with an infographic that clearly showed how to register or confirm my registration, but I also had access to voter registration forms. Historic photos and artifacts – several were unique and unexpected – keenly supported the narrative of voting’s evolution in Washington State. My favorites included a pamphlet from 1970 titled “Vote for Nobody” and a chair used during the first convening of Washington’s Territory Legislature in 1854.

Next, I chose to investigate “Impact the Ballot.” Our state is somewhat unique in that anyone can propose a ballot initiative, and with a minimum number of signatures, get that initiative on the ballot for a statewide vote. As someone who was not born or raised

in Washington, it was surprising to see what kinds of initiatives made it onto the ballot in the past. Several interactive components allowed me to learn more about past ballot initiatives, as well those who chose to run for office ([intro image](#)). Beyond ballot initiatives, running for office was the second component of this section. Lots of artifacts – from classic campaign signs and buttons to more playful “merch” like shoelaces and beer bottles – bore witness to the diversity of individuals and campaign tactics that Washington State has seen since the late 1800s.

My last option, “Organize, Mobilize, Resist,” was perhaps the most powerful gallery of the three. This was in part because many of the issues highlighted were ones I have lived through in some way during my tenure in Seattle. Another reason this gallery felt special was the attention given to organizing,

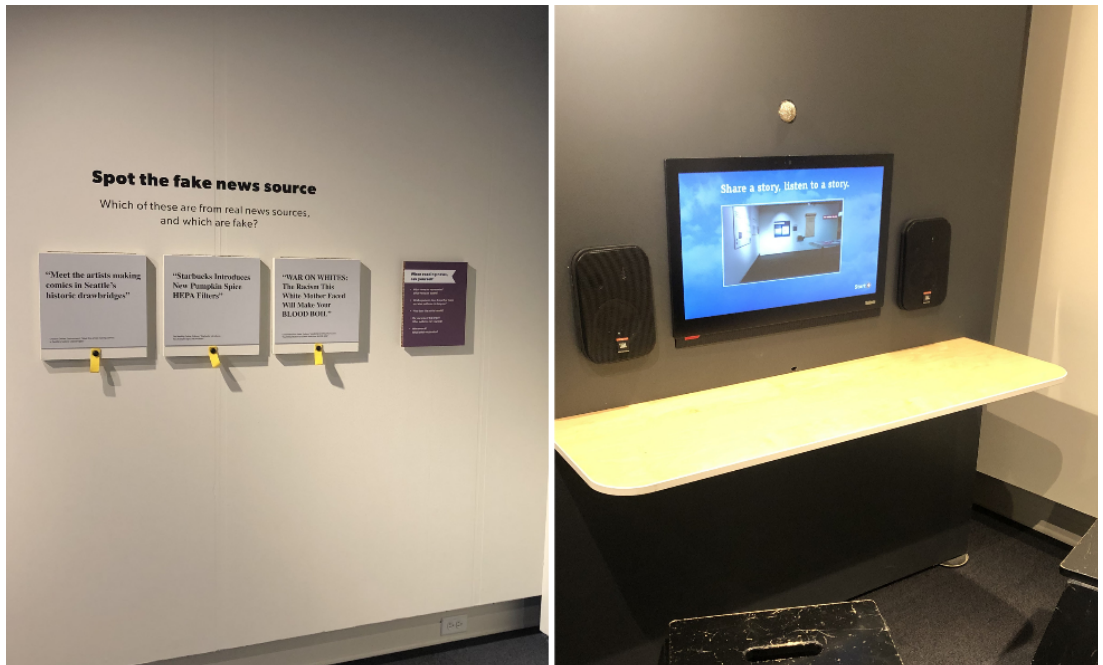
Fig. 4.

A video and corresponding panel detail the history of America’s representative democracy.



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Fig. 5. The “Organize, Mobilize, Resist” section of the exhibition is filled with artifacts and graphics that illuminate Washington’s rich history of organized resistance and speaking out against issues that impact the state’s residents.



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Fig. 6. A cluster of interactives offer visitors opportunities to think deeper about information-sharing and have conversations with each other. *Left:* An exhibit on media literacy asks visitors to guess which headlines are real. Lifting the door reveals more information about each news source and whether or not the headline is fake. *Right:* A recording station lets visitors record themselves – or watch videos from other visitors – sharing what democracy means to them.

an often overlooked and undervalued strategy for affecting policy change. Seeing that these strategies were given equal weight with voting and running for office felt validating – particularly given the voices heard in this space, both audibly and visually. Individuals and communities of color were rightfully centered as leaders of many of these movements. Two artifacts in this section spoke to some of Washington’s ongoing battles: the recognition of Indigenous rights and the labor movement’s quest for equitable working conditions (fig. 5). This section also offered many opportunities to watch, listen, and interact with media documenting some of Seattle’s most impactful and explosive moments of protest and mobilization, from the 1999 World Trade Organization protests to the 2020 occupied protest of Seattle’s Capitol Hill neighborhood.

The final section, located in a small connected gallery, was devoted entirely to interactivity. Games, another multiple-choice question, and storytelling opportunities were all designed to help visitors of all ages think more deeply about their role in making democracy work (fig. 6). The highlight for me was the two large walls devoted to media literacy, encouraging me to think about the intention behind news headlines and testing my ability to discern real from fake news. I did wish, though, that there were more accessible options for those visitors with disabilities to participate in the games. Strict cleaning protocols likely complicated what would otherwise be straightforward solutions, like providing larger print or tactile cards for visually impaired visitors wanting to play the “Who Changed American More?” game. Overall, this gallery was a lot of fun, and I hope MOHAI will continue to work on

ways to better engage visitors of all abilities once the museum can reopen.

While I had the privilege of spending unlimited time wandering through *Stand Up Seattle* alone, I am really looking forward to hearing about other visitors’ experiences. This exhibition is clearly the culmination of countless hours of thoughtful outreach, adapting to changing local and global public health conditions and social unrest, and responsive design. All of it was done on a very tight timeline to boot. What feels most exciting about this exhibition is that it is less like a snapshot in time and more like a jumping-off point for determining the future.

I hope other visitors will feel empowered to get involved after their experience with *Stand Up Seattle*, or at minimum, better equipped to have conversations about issues that impact their communities. If I had anything to offer in terms of missed opportunities, it might be including a way to learn more about some interesting stories that were briefly mentioned in the exhibition but left me hanging – particularly those related to some of Washington’s Indigenous communities, and more broadly, how forms of tribal governance inspired (or were copied directly by) the architects of America’s democracy. In a year marked by instability, uncertainty, and loss, it was good to be reminded of what we *can* do to hold on to the things that matter: our connections to each other, our communities, and our democracy. ■