

## Court's Campaign Finance Ruling Reverberates in Maine

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**While Maine's crowded race for governor has attracted most of the political media attention in the state in recent months, the story of Maine's two Congressional races was moved forward on several fronts today: first by the entrance of a GOP challenger in the 1st District race, and second, by a major court decision that will affect the rules governing the financial role corporations can play in federal campaigns.**

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By a vote of 5-4, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned campaign spending restrictions that have been in effect for decades, ruling that corporations and unions may spend whatever they want to either support, or oppose candidates for president and Congress.

The ban on direct contributions to candidates still stands, but the ruling now treats corporations and unions just like any other citizen when it comes to spending on, for example, advertising in favor of, or against federal candidates.

"This decision is refreshing, because it's really a transformative opinion that has the Supreme Court affirming the First Amendment rights of all groups -- businesses, unions, non-profit advocacy groups -- to participate in campaigns," says Jeff Patch of the Washington D.C.-based Center For Competitive Politics, a non-profit whose stated mission is to promote and defend citizens' First Amendment political rights of speech, assembly, and petition.

Patch says it's important to remember that the ruling does not remove all restrictions on corporate or union political donations.

"Corporations can't contribute to candidates necessarily -- a lot of state laws still ban that, as I think Maine does -- so what this really is, is about corporations and unions speaking out, and not about giving directly to candidates, which is still banned at the federal level."

But critics of the ruling say it will have a major negative impact on congressional races nationwide.

"Yes, it will be very significant, corporations have large corporate coffers at their disposal, and we're

very concerned about what unfettered access to campaign spending will mean," says Chris Bell, a federal field associate for the U.S. Public Interest Research Group, or U.S. PIRG, in Maine.

"Likely we'll see a lot more money in races," Bell says. "And unfortunately we're probably going to see an increase in the amount of time that candidates spend on raising money, and money is almost undoubtedly going to play a bigger role in these campaigns rather than the issues and ideas that we think are most important."

"And basically what it would do is it allows big oil, big Pharma, Wall Street, to pick their friends, oppose reform and run candidates who are going to go along with their point of view," says 1st District Congresswoman Chellie Pingree. Pingree says the ruling sets campaign finance law in the U.S. back 100 years, and is further evidence that more reforms are necessary.

Pingree is sponsoring legislation called the "Fair Elections Now Act" that would take a page from Maine's Clean Elections playbook and apply it to federal campaigns.

"It's a voluntary system, just like Maine," she says. "It limits contributions to \$100 dollars, and it emphasizes grassroots support just as we do in Maine, and it basically requires candidates to collect qualifying contributions and then it has a public financing component. So it really takes out the constant fundraising and the ability for money to drive so much of the political process, as it does today."

Jeff Patch of the Center for Competitive Politics says his group opposes Pingree's bill, not because of concerns about free speech, but because, he says, it's just bad policy.

"We think it could potentially pass constitutional muster, but we're still opposed to it because, ultimately, we think that the system works best when private individuals and groups decide to support candidates who they agree with instead of having their tax dollars funnelled to candidates who they may not necessarily agree with," Patch says.

The state's two congressional races meanwhile, are beginning to take shape. Enter York County businessman Dean Scontras, who announced that he'll take on incumbent Democrat Chellie Pingree in Maine's 1st District. Scontras, who lost the GOP primary in the same race two years ago to Charlie Summers, is, so far, the only Republican to declare candidacy in the race.

In the sprawling 2nd District, Jason Levesque, a businessman from Auburn, today kicked off a six-week campaign tour in hopes of earning the right to take on incumbent Democrat Mike Michaud in the fall. Levesque is an Army veteran, and founder of Argo Marketing Group, who announced his campaign back in May.