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Clean Elections threatened?

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Money talks in American politics ... now, more than ever. That's largely because the U.S. Supreme Court's "Citizens United" ruling on Jan. 21 affirmed the free speech rights of corporations as being equal to the rights of citizens and therefore the government may not ban political spending by corporations in elections.

Never mind that corporations typically have oodles more money to "talk" with than the average citizen. That's irrelevant to the five justices in Justice Roberts' Supreme Court who don't seem too worried that unfettered spending of money in politics by corporations might well "drown out the voices of everyday Americans," as President Obama warned the day after the 5-4 ruling.

Now we have an additional reason to be concerned over the impact the Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission ruling will have on our politics.

On Tuesday, the U.S. Supreme Court issued a court order temporarily blocking Arizona's Clean Elections system from providing extra money to publicly funded candidates who are outspent by privately financed opponents or targeted by independent groups' spending. The justices ordered that the planned distribution of matching funds in several high-profile Arizona campaigns must be withheld until the court can hear a full appeal of that state's matching funds system.

According to the Associated Press, the court isn't expected to hear the appeal until fall — too late for Arizona's primary election scheduled for Aug. 24, and, perhaps, too late for the Nov. 2 general election. Arizona's Clean Elections Commission had been slated to begin distributing matching funds on June 22.

In effect, Tuesday's court order gives an immediate financial advantage to privately funded Arizona candidates who had outraised and outspent their publicly funded opponents.

Welcome to the political realities fast-emerging under the Roberts' Supreme Court: Corporations can spend as much as they want and states like Arizona and Maine — which created Clean Elections Campaign systems that allow publicly funded candidates to run competitive races without relying on special-interest money — now have a reason to worry their efforts to clean up politics will be negated by our highest court.

Make no mistake, if the court goes down that path and rules Clean Election matching funds in Arizona are illegal — which could jeopardize Maine and Connecticut, which have similar public campaign finance systems — it opens the campaign financing floodgates for privately financed candidates to outspend their publicly funded rivals.

In declaring Tuesday's court order a victory for "free speech," Arizona attorney Bill Maurer appears eager to take his case before a Supreme Court he has every reason to believe will be sympathetic to his arguments characterizing matching funds as "unconstitutional."

"Matching funds violate the First Amendment rights of candidates, citizens and independent groups," Maurer said in a release about Tuesday's court order. "The government may not give an electoral advantage to one candidate by 'leveling' the speech of his opponents. The point of the Clean Elections Act is to limit spending on speech, and that is exactly what it does."

According to Maurer, privately funded candidates are victimized when their financial advantage is leveled by Clean Elections matching funds. Conversely, he says, Clean Elections candidates, in receiving matching funds, are given an electoral advantage over privately funded candidates. Essentially, he's saying democracy is actually best served when privately funded candidates can spend "freely" — without any constraints or concern for grassroots efforts designed to curb the influence of money on our elections. Candidates with lots of private cash are underdogs when opposed by candidates who achieve equal footing with public money?

As novelist George Orwell understood exceedingly well, the function of doublethink — the deliberate reversal of common meanings — is to confuse the issue and distract the listener from what's really going down.

In the "Citizens United" ruling and, potentially, the Arizona "McComish v. Bennett" case, what appears to be going down is a corporate takeover of our elections system.

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