

Congress should listen, overturn Citizens United

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Maine joined a dozen other states earlier this week in urging Congress to overturn the Supreme Court's Citizens United decision via constitutional amendment.

Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission was decided by the high court in 2010, and said that political speech of corporations cannot be limited on the basis of a corporation being a corporation. In its majority opinion, the Supreme Court said it "rejected the argument that political speech of corporations or other associations should be treated differently under the First Amendment simply because such associations are not 'natural persons.'"

This change to a century-old restriction that sought to make the campaign financing process more fair and transparent has led to unprecedented spending in political campaigns – as evidenced in the last presidential campaign and even here in Maine in local legislative races.

The floodgates are open and the money is flowing.

In Maine, shortly before the November election, Maine Citizens for Clean Elections released a report showing that spending was on the rise. In addition to the Citizens United decision, Maine's clean elections system was weakened earlier in 2012, resulting in a loss of funding and the ability for clean elections candidates in contentious races to raise additional funds.

In one local race, for House District 139, part of Lyman and Waterboro, \$23,734 was spent, compared to \$3,873 in 2010, according to October 2012 campaign spending reports analyzed by MCCE. The race between Democrat Joseph Wagner and Republican Aaron Libby, who were both privately financed, was costly, coming in at five times what was spent in the previous contest for the district.

In the presidential elections, millions of dollars were pumped into campaigns for Republicans trying to win their party's nod, including two \$5 million contributions to Newt Gingrich's campaign by billionaire casino mogul named Sheldon Adelson. He gave \$10 million to a political action committee – PAC – backing Gingrich in what is among the largest known political donations in U.S. history.

Voters could see the results of the influx of campaign money. Polls changed daily in many places – corresponding with spending. When Mitt Romney finally got the nomination and he and his supporters put millions into television advertising in Florida, he got a spike in support in that state. And while he ultimately lost his bid to President Barack Obama, the game has been changed forever, and those who cannot spend or don't have super-rich supporters to spend on their behalf have no hope of political careers.

Reversing Citizens United would reinstate a more equal playing field in campaign spending, and would end the influx of millions and millions of dollars being spent trying to buy Americans' votes.

The measure approved this week by Maine legislators, which drew bipartisan support, calls on Congress to pass a constitutional amendment to reverse the ruling in Citizens United v. FEC, and was summed up perfectly by Rep. Dennis Keschl, R-Belgrade, who said, "Unions, corporations and other wealthy special interest groups should not be able to use their money to drown out the voices of the people."

We agree, and we hope Congress hears the call of Mainers and the many lawmakers and voters who see the detrimental effect this decision has had on the democratic process in this country. Citizens United must be overturned to allow serving in political office to be open to everyone, not just those with deep pockets and friends in high places.

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