

# FAIRFIELD SUN TIMES

## Campaign Finance Censors Lose Debate to Reddit

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Recently, the website Reddit, which is aptly called “the front page of the Internet,” featured an interesting discussion on attempts to overturn Citizens United, the 2010 Supreme Court case that held that the First Amendment protects the right of corporations and unions to make independent expenditures in elections. A group of five people working to overturn the decision fielded questions from the community in a so-called “Ask Me Anything” (AMA) thread. Past AMAs have been created by a wide-range of famous and interesting people, including Jon Stewart and even Barack Obama.

The five advocates titled the thread “We’re Working on Overturning the Citizens United Supreme Court Decision – Ask Us Anything!” Fielding questions were Aquene Freechild from Public Citizen, Daniel Lee from Move to Amend, John Bonifaz from Free Speech for People, Lisa Graves from Center for Media and Democracy, and Zephyr Teachout former candidate for New York governor and associate professor of law at Fordham University.

At the beginning of the AMA they proclaimed:

*January 21st is the 5th Anniversary of the disastrous Supreme Court Citizens United v. FEC decision that unleashed the floodgates of money from special interests.*

*Hundreds of groups across the country are working hard to overturn Citizens United. To raise awareness about all the progress that has happened behind the scenes in the past five years, we’ve organized a few people on the front lines to share the latest.*

Surprisingly, at least to me, the AMA was a disaster. Reddit caters to younger people and, as such, it is generally quite left-wing. The Reddit “Politics” community, in particular, is known for having a substantial left-wing tilt. I had thought the community would rally around the advocates—pat them on the back, complain about the Koch brothers, and pontificate on how no “real” policy change can occur until “big money” is silenced.

Instead, the community not only asked excellent and difficult questions, but they clearly identified the fundamental problems with the advocates’ position.

The advocates didn't help their cause by not answering many questions. This is a big Reddit no-no, a violation of "Reddiquette." It is certainly a bad idea to create a thread called "Ask Me Anything" and then answer only a few questions, while ignoring the hard ones.

The top-rated comment (the comment with the most "upvotes" will be at the top) asked some particularly difficult questions. User SaroDarksbane asked:

*The Citizens United case was about a non-profit organization that wanted to air an advertisement for a film they made that was critical of a politician and was told by the government that it was illegal for them to do so.*

- By overturning this decision, aren't you advocating that the government have the legal right to censor political speech?*
- The eventual Supreme Court decision was that censoring political speech (especially during an election) was against the first amendment. Why do you disagree with that opinion?*
- Are you worried that allowing government censorship of political speech could ever backfire against you or the causes you support, should the reins of power be handed to politicians who disagree with you?*
- For any political opinion you hold, how much money would a politician of the opposite opinion have to spend on advertisements to cause you to vote against your opinion at the polls?*

*The last question is quite interesting, and it went largely unanswered. Many advocates for increased campaign finance restrictions seem to think that the opinions of the "average person" (which does not include them, of course) are easily overcome with the brute force of money. (I've written more on this here.) Jonah from Public Citizen responded:*

*Billionaires and mega-corporations (and institutions that represent them like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce) spend a tremendous amount of money to research how people will respond to various messages and use this money to successfully influence the outcome of elections. They bring people to office who do not represent the interests of those who are electing them.*

The first sentence seems little better than invoking a type of mind control. The second sentence is a bald admission that he and his organization are trying to censor speech in order to keep people from making bad decisions against their "interests," which I'm sure are highly correlated with Jonah's own political positions. He adds that restricting campaign speech is important because "Truth is drowned out." Although campaign finance restrictions are unquestionably about censorship, rarely have I seen such a straightforward admission of that fact. Apparently, some people and organizations should be silenced because if hoi polloi hear it they might be forced to vote against their "interests."

Another perceptive user, bbbjorkman, asked:

*Can you please explain why you think "unleash[ing] the floodgates of money from special interests" is such a bad thing? Simply showing that more money is being spent on elections now than in the past doesn't, in and of itself, prove anything normative.*

*For every Koch or Karl Rove there's a Soros or AFL-CIO or Tom Steyer—why is trying to silence them better than, for instance, simply requiring full and fair disclosure?*

*Finally, I'm assuming you'd want an exception to your amendments/laws/regulations for corporations that publish newspapers and magazines. Can you please explain why The New York Times Company doesn't pose the same supposed risks to our democracy that, say, Crossroads GPS does (in your minds, at least)?*

Those excellent questions also went unanswered.

Given the amount of bad press Citizens United has received, especially on Reddit in the past, it was incredibly enlivening to see the community galvanize such an effective response. It was also surprising to see the advocates give such inadequate answers. Perhaps, when you advocate censorship, it is difficult to answer such pointed questions.

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