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Published January 28, 2010

Public financing key to future campaigns

THE OLYMPIAN

The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that limits on campaign donations violate the First Amendment free-speech rights of corporations.

The 5-4 court decision will flood the nation with campaign cash resulting in elective offices going to the highest bidder. We'll have Boeing's senator, the trial lawyers' congressman, the Nation Rifle Association's state legislator and the Sierra Club's council member.

The only way to stop campaigns from raising obscene amounts of money is to level the playing field through public financing. The Fair Elections Now Act, which has been introduced in Congress, would allow federal candidates to choose to run for office without relying on large contributions, bundled cash from political parties or donations from lobbyists. Candidates who raise a large number of contributions under \$100 from their communities would have those funds matched with federal funds.

Public financing would help restore the voters' faith in electoral politics.

SHARP REVERSAL

Last week's Supreme Court decision swept away long-standing limits on campaign spending by labor unions and corporations in federal elections.

"The government may regulate corporate political speech through disclaimer and disclosure requirements, but it may not suppress that speech altogether," Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote for the five conservative members of the court.

Justice John Paul Stevens wrote a stinging dissent for the four liberal justices. He said, "The court's ruling threatens to undermine the integrity of elected institutions across the nation." Stevens wrote, "The court's ruling dramatically enhances the role of corporations and unions, and the narrow interests they represent ... in determining who will hold public office."

If that isn't a sobering thought, nothing is. Congressional seats should not be sold to the largest campaign contributor.

The case before the nine Supreme Court justices was *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*. The divided opinion sets aside longtime limits on campaign contributions and paves the way for corporations and unions to exhaust their treasuries on campaign advertisements and other candidate promotion efforts.

Reaction to the landmark decision was immediate and mixed.

League of Conservation Voters President Gene Karpinski warned that the ruling “will open the floodgates for oil companies like Exxon to spend vast sums of money to influence the outcome of federal elections.”

More sanguine, legal scholar Ilya Shapiro of the libertarian Cato Institute insisted that “more spending — more political communication — leads to better informed voters.”

Former Federal Election Commissioner Bradley Smith said, “This case will lead to more spending, and that’s a good thing.”

How is that a good thing?

RESHAPING ELECTIONS

The decision will reshape the way elections are conducted and could have immediate consequences in this fall’s midterm national elections.

Make no mistake, federal officials spend an inordinate amount of time raising cash for their next race.

Rep. Brian Baird, D-Vancouver, who is not seeking reelection to his 3rd Congressional District seat this fall, said he has taken votes over the years knowing that it will cost him campaign contributions from special interest groups. Tying votes to campaign contributions does, as Justice Stevens said, “undermine the integrity of elected institutions across the nation.”

While some are proposing a constitutional amendment to nullify the court’s decision, a simpler route would be to launch a public debate about publicly financed campaigns through the Fair Elections Now Act. S. 752 was introduced by Sens. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., and Arlen Specter, D-Pa. The House version, H.R. 1826, was introduced by Reps. John Larson, D-Conn. and Walter Jones, Jr., R-N.C. The House of Representatives bill has 126 co-sponsors, showing at least some level of support for changing the rules of campaign financing.

The current campaign finance system — soon to be exacerbated by the Supreme Court decision — undermines democracy. It favors moneyed interests over citizens. It creates perceived conflicts when lawmakers accept large contributions from private interests directly affected by federal legislation. It makes it difficult for qualified candidates to mount competitive campaigns against well-financed incumbents and it takes lawmakers away from their important legislative duties by putting them in constant campaign finance mode.

The Supreme Court decision must serve as a springboard to a more democratic and representative campaign finance system in this country. Start the conversation by talking about public financing.