



The League of Women Voters of Portland

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CAMPAIGN FINANCE REFORM: Good for Portland, good for the nation

On Thursday, the U.S. Supreme Court opened a new door for the deepest-pocketed players to spend money on independent campaigns to elect or defeat federal candidates. An effective campaign finance reform program in Portland, however, points to what's needed in both Salem and Washington, D.C.

Since 1947 corporate entities have been banned from using profits or general funds for independent spending in federal elections. Instead their vehicle for political expression has been to collect contributions for political committees that are allowed to spend money on independent electioneering.

Led by Chief Justice John Roberts, the high court Thursday used a narrow campaign finance case as the vehicle for a sweeping review of restrictions on a corporation's or a union's use of general funds for independent advertisements that endorse or oppose a federal candidate.

At the heart of the case was a group calling itself Citizens United, which produced a pay-per-view political movie about Hillary Clinton during the last presidential primaries. The content and timing of the movie raised questions about whether it was a campaign ad and therefore subject to financial disclosure requirements and limits on the source of its funding. Though a narrow ruling was possible, Justice Roberts issued a broader decision written by Anthony Kennedy with Samuel Alito, Anton Scalia, and Clarence Thomas concurring. Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg, John Paul Stevens, Stephen Breyer, and Sonia Sotomayor joined in dissent.

While the ruling doesn't affect bans on use of corporate or union general funds for *direct* campaign contributions to federal candidates, it illustrates the antipathy the court's majority has towards a regulatory approach to financing election campaigns.

Portland, however, is a national leader in that reform after adopting public campaign financing in 2005, a reform strategy that is gaining momentum at the federal level. Called Voter-Owned Elections in Portland and Fair Elections Now Act in Washington, D.C., the basic concept is the same. The reform system emphasizes small donor fundraising and provides limited public support to put typical folks on equal footing with corporate interests in funding candidate campaigns.

President Obama co-sponsored the Fair Elections Now Act when he was in the Senate. The current version of this bill to provide public financing for federal offices has bi-partisan sponsorship with 125 co-sponsors in the House. Co-sponsors include Oregon Representatives Earl Blumenauer, Peter DeFazio, and David Wu. Their support is all the more important after the *Citizens United* case, and we urge other Oregon House members and Senators Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley to support the legislation when it is introduced.

This kind of reform strategy has reduced campaign spending and special interest influence while increasing the importance of grassroots campaigning by a more diverse set of candidates in Portland and the other states and cities where it's been tried. Public financing reform will improve government accountability.

Submitted by:

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“To promote political responsibility through informed and active participation in government.”