

MONEY, INFLUENCE and LOCAL POLITICS

Even prior to the January 2010 Supreme Court ruling “Citizens United,” state and local politics were not immune from the same potential for money to influence outcomes seen at the federal level.

At the time of the ruling, twenty-four states had legislation that in one form or another restricted corporation campaign spending or required types of disclosure at the state level. These laws are now vulnerable to challenge and repeal as a result of the Supreme Court decision.¹

Of particular concern is the impact on state judicial elections. A 2001 poll found that most elected state and local judges feel pressed to raise funds prior to campaigns. Even with the various state restrictions, it was not uncommon for business interests and lawyers to be the largest donors to judicial campaigns in those thirty-nine states that elect some or all of their judges. Retired Justice Sandra Day O’ Connor, already worried that such contributions threaten our system of fair and independent courts, expressed concern that the Supreme Court ruling exacerbates this risk.²

Though proportionately smaller in scale, the influence of money is seen even at the municipal level. In the 2009 city council races in Spokane Washington, a city union, a homebuilder PAC, a water power utility as well as a PAC of mostly progressive Democrats all made four-figure donations to council and mayoral candidates.³

Business groups work against candidates or ballot proposals that might prove costly to their interests. In Eureka, California in 1999, Walmart spent thousands of dollars on proposed changes to zoning laws; in 2003 a lumber company attempted a recall against the district attorney after he filed suit against them. Frustrated by the undue influence wielded by corporations in their local campaigns, a citizen-led grassroots effort passed a ballot initiative measure in 2006 prohibiting non-local corporations from contributing to Humboldt County elections.⁴

Financial considerations impact the playing field before campaigns even begin, limiting voter opportunity to elect the best person for the position. The average cost of running for San Jose City Council in 2005 was \$45,000. Qualified persons who could not afford to be in debt for that amount may well have been dissuaded from casting their hats into the ring. In fact just the knowledge of a competitor’s sizeable war chest may discourage potential candidates from entering a race. ⁵

Major industries such as health, tobacco, insurance and finance can be key players in determining election outcomes with no requirement for them to acknowledge their roles in the process. Even chambers of commerce are players, seeking to protect the interests of their members. In such ways, outside money renders useless the concept of one person one vote. ⁶

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