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Citizens United will stifle business innovation



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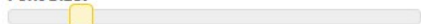


By David Levine For The Floyd County Times

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Five years after the Supreme Court handed down its decision in Citizens United v. FEC, the United States is still feeling its ill effects. The 2012 election cycle proved to be the most expensive cycle in history, with an estimated \$6 billion in spending on federal races; 2014, meanwhile, was the most expensive midterm election cycle in history. In all likelihood, future election cycles will eclipse those marks.

This isn't just a problem for good government advocates. It's a problem for businesses too.

All economic activity exists within a marketplace that is defined by laws enacted through the democratic process. If our democratic institutions are not healthy, the structures of

our markets cannot be healthy - and our economy will suffer. We see this in other nations where concentration of power leads to pervasive corruption and self-dealing across the economy. This stifles innovation, inhibits entrepreneurship, and causes extremes of wealth and poverty that destabilize society.

The greatest menace to election integrity in America today is how easily unlimited money, cloaked in secrecy, is brought into the system. That money buys votes in elections, influences elected officials, and disables the regulatory process by dangling irresistible job offers and consulting contracts in front of officials charged with regulating vital economic activity.

Our democratic system of government – and our world-leading business innovation and entrepreneurship – thrive when elections are open and fair, when all citizens can fully participate, and when special interests are not allowed to corrupt the system or exert undue influence.

According to polling commissioned by the American Sustainable Business Council, two-thirds of small business owners view the Citizens United decision as bad for business, compared to only nine percent who view it favorably. Nearly 90 percent have a negative view of the role money plays in politics overall. And remarkably, half of the respondents were self-identified Republicans.

The reason is simple: Most businesses prefer to invest money in their companies rather than trying to buy elections. These are funds they believe are better spent on upgrading their technology or hiring the best talent, business decisions that are good for their bottom line and the communities they serve.

Instead, the Citizens United decision has enabled a minority of large corporations to spend unlimited amounts of money on elections in complete secrecy.

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If corporations with the deepest pockets can have this undue influence on our elections, then the priorities of the small and medium businesses that make our economy grow will be pushed aside. Most business owners believe that this is bad distortion of a free market.

There's certainly a role for businesses to play in the policy process. It's important for policymakers to understand the concerns that businesses have, and that's a role organizations like ASBC play in bringing business owners and policymakers together.

At the same time, there is a growing response to Citizens United. Shareholders have called for full disclosure of corporate contributions. More than a third of US senators and representatives - and more than a third of the states - have called for a constitutional amendment overturning Citizens United. A half dozen proposed amendments were introduced in the last Congress - and one of them got the support of 54 senators.

We need to return to a focus on rebuilding our infrastructure, investing in new technologies and other initiatives to build a strong U.S. economy. That is why business leaders are speaking out in favor of overturning the Citizens United decision.

It's important that members of Congress realize that their constituents - including small businesses - want them to get hidden and unrestricted money out of politics. It won't be easy; the same big money interests whom Citizens United has helped will continue to use that paid access as a means to drive policies for their benefit alone. But it's something that has to be done - and that small business owners across the country, and across both sides of the aisle, want to see.

Five years later, Citizens United is still bad for business. It's past time we did something about it.

Levine is CEO of the American Sustainable Business Council, which with its member organizations represents more than 200,000 U.S. businesses.

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