

[By Chris Garofolo](#)

U.S. Rep. Peter Welch announced two action plans Friday morning aimed at prompting federal watchdog groups to crack down on the massive amount of specialized funding on the campaign trail.

Speaking before reporters and nearly two dozen community members in downtown Brattleboro, the Vermont Democrat unveiled his proposition for the Internal Revenue Service to undertake an investigation of political groups passing as nonprofits. He also called on the Obama Administration to jumpstart the Federal Election Commission to reconvene its efforts overseeing Americans fairly casting their ballots.

His announcement comes just days before multiple Vermont towns prepare for a Town Meeting Day resolution opposing the Citizens United decision at the Supreme Court in January 2010.

Vermont's sole U.S. House representative is calling on the Internal Revenue Service to investigate if nonprofits affiliated with Super Political Action Committees (PACs) violate federal law because they are generally prohibited from engaging in political activity if they have tax-exempt status.

"Congress created a tax break for nonprofit social welfare organizations because communities across our country benefit greatly from their important work. It is clearly contrary to the intent of Congress for organizations supporting a candidate for office or running attack ads against a candidate to receive taxpayer support intended for legitimate nonprofit groups," said Welch in a letter to IRS Commissioner Douglas Shulman.

Current IRS regulations prohibit nonprofits from direct or indirect participation or intervention in political campaigns on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office.

To date, the 2012 Republican presidential primary has given Americans a preview of coming

attractions steps are not taken to curtail outside influences, Welch said.

"We have got a lot of nonprofit organizations, really political organizations masquerading as nonprofits," he said. "The letter that I'm going to be circulating to my colleagues is calling on the IRS to do its job. Don't give tax-exempt status to essentially political organizations."

Several Vermont towns, including Putney, have petitioned for an article saying corporations are not people and shall never enjoy the rights of personhood within the town's borders. In Brattleboro, voters will decide on a resolution calling on Vermont's congressional delegation to support legislation that will regulate corporate spending on campaigns.

"I myself have been working on the issue of corporate personhood for years and support a constitutional amendment and I'm thrilled that [Welch] is working on that," said Selectboard Vice-Chairwoman Dora Bouboulis of Brattleboro. "I think it's a good step in the right direction to begin addressing the issue of corporate spending in political campaigns."

Efforts from within Vermont are a direct response to the court's Citizens United decision, which overturned a century of campaign finance law.

On Jan. 21, 2010, the Supreme Court ruled 5-4 in favor of the conservative action group Citizens United against the Federal Election Commission, lifting strict restrictions on corporate spending in political campaigns. Opponents of the decision say it grants corporations or Super PACs the same rights as an individual.

"The Supreme Court seemed to get this question on who is a person wrong. The U.S. Supreme Court back in the 1850s decided African Americans weren't persons, and now in 2010 they decided corporations are," Welch said.

Republicans hailed the victory as a First Amendment issue and declared the decision brings the country one step closer to the Founding Fathers' vision of free speech.

"If the freedom of speech means anything, it means protecting the right of private citizens to voice opposition or support for their elected representatives. The fact that the court overturned a 20-year precedent speaks volumes about the importance of this issue," said Rep. Mike Pence, R-Ind., after the 2010 ruling. "This decision is a victory on behalf of those who cherish the fundamental freedoms protected by the First Amendment."

Welch has co-sponsored three constitutional amendments to overturn Citizens United, but the congressman has also sent a letter to President Barack Obama, a first-term Democrat, urging his administration to use its constitutional authority to fill five openings on the six-member Federal Election Commission during the next recess of the United States Senate.

He argues partisanship in the Senate has caused the FEC, created by Congress to serve as a watchdog overseeing federal elections, to become ineffective with five expired terms. Welch said filling those seats will allow the agency to return to its work policing within.

"Right now, because of the unwillingness of the Senate to proceed on appointments that are presented to us by President Obama, there's total gridlock," Welch said. "We want to say, 'Look Mr. President, the Senate won't act, you act. Use your recess appointment authority, get those people doing their jobs so that we can enforce the laws that we do have.'"

In the post-Citizens United era, Welch said Super PACs "have opened the spigots of spending on political campaigns and the rules of the campaign trail are muddier now than ever before," and the commission is paralyzed by inaction. Action from the White House will "breathe life into this important agency and send a clear signal to those seeking to exploit an uncertain campaign landscape that the cop is back on the beat and that federal election laws will be fully enforced," according to Welch.