

[By Wilson Ring](#)

A senator with socialist leanings was among the first. Then there was Jerry of Ben & Jerry's ice cream fame. Stephen Colbert has tweeted in favor. And now people in at least 52 Vermont communities will use the bully pulpit of that New England institution, Town Meeting Day, to push for an amendment to the U.S. Constitution declaring that corporations are not people.

States and communities from Maine to Hawaii and Florida to Alaska have considered similar calls, but tiny Vermont -- with its penchant for using its annual testament to participatory democracy to offer the world opinions on issues way beyond the town budget -- is making the most concerted effort.

The goal is to get rid of the 2010 U.S. Supreme Court's Citizens United decision, which allowed corporations, unions and wealthy people to raise and spend unlimited campaign funds via political action committees known as "super PACs" as long as they don't work directly with a candidate.

At the heart of the debate is "corporate personhood," the U.S. legal concept that gives corporations rights like those of an individual. Critics say that it poisons the electoral process and that the only way to trash the practice is by amending the U.S. Constitution.

"People are starting to put the pieces together; they're all doing it all at the same time, all across the country," said Bill Butler, of Jericho, who helped write the proposal being considered by many Vermont towns.

"You start putting these together, I think you have the beginning of the most dynamic political movement in this country. It's because people are realizing they have to do it and they have to do it now."

Vermonters are not unanimous on the issue.

"I think it's a wretched idea," said John McClaughry, the vice president and founder of the Kirby-based Ethan Allen Institute, which describes itself as a "free-market, public policy" think tank that focuses on Vermont issues.

"You simply cannot, in a democracy with the Bill of Rights, deny ... associations of people the opportunity to voice their views. And that's what the majority essentially said," McClaughry said, referring to the Citizens United decision. "And associations of people have the same constitutional rights as individual people. I think that was the right decision."

For generations, Town Meeting Day, held by most communities on the first Tuesday in March, has sent residents to local town halls, schools or other locations to meet, debate and decide issues as broad as budgets or as focused as whether a community should buy a new fire truck.

One of the first times Vermonters weighed in on social issues came in 1982, when the Cold War was still raging and more than 200 communities called for a nuclear freeze.

Since then, Town Meeting Day has been occasionally used to weigh in on issues as varied as nuclear power or the use of genetically modified organisms. A small number of Vermont communities have even voted on whether former President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney should have been indicted for war crimes.

So it comes as no surprise that Vermont should be the place where people would use the annual meeting in what some might consider a quixotic attempt to amend the U.S. Constitution. Amending the Constitution requires that the proposal pass both houses of Congress by two-thirds votes and then be approved by three-quarters of the states.

There are a handful of personhood proposals being considered in Congress. In December, independent Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders introduced a proposed amendment to declare that for-profit corporations and limited liability companies would not have the constitutional rights of "natural persons."

Although the Town Meeting Day proposals can be amended during the meetings, the basic proposal is simpler than Sanders'. It would urge Vermont's three-member congressional delegation to begin the process to amend the Constitution and declare that corporations are not persons and money is not speech.

In January, Sanders jousted with Colbert on the political satirist's television show. During their interview, Colbert mocked the idea but then tweeted in favor of the proposal.

Vermont's lone congressman, Democrat Peter Welch, is backing a version in that chamber, where a handful of versions are being considered. The state's other U.S. senator, Democrat Patrick Leahy, has been a critic of the Citizens United decision but has not endorsed a specific proposal to amend the Constitution.

The Vermont Legislature is considering a variation of the idea. In January, Jerry Greenfield, a co-founder of Ben & Jerry's ice cream, spoke in support of the idea.

While most Vermont towns vote Tuesday, at least two considered the issue over the weekend. In Thetford, supporters say the proposal passed by a vote of about 150 to 3. In Woodstock, an amended version that added unions to the list of groups not considered people passed by an overwhelming voice vote.

A petition on Sanders' website has almost 210,000 signatures. The same website has a map that lists the locations across the country where similar proposals are being considered.