

By Chris Garofolo, Brattleboro Reformer

Vermont's congressional team is supporting a legislative response to counter a Supreme Court decision allowing corporations to spend freely on political campaigns.

The state's three delegates on Capitol Hill rallied behind the measure to fight the Jan. 21 Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission ruling that lifted strict restrictions on corporate spending in political campaigns.

The Democratic legislation, similarly known in both the House and the Senate as the Democracy Is Strengthened by Casting Light On Spending in Elections (DISCLOSE) Act, is designed to enhance corporate disclaimer and disclosure requirements, prevent government contractors from influencing elections and prohibit coordination between candidates and outside groups.

Vermont independent Sen. Bernie Sanders said he co-sponsored legislation Thursday to limit the influence of special interest cash entering federal elections.

"Congress must move forward aggressively in response to the ruling that would open the flood gates for the largest corporations to spend unlimited resources electing candidates who represent their interests," he said. "Unless the law is changed, the ruling will give control of the political process to the wealthiest and most powerful institutions in the world and the candidates who support their agenda. Instead of democracy being about one-person, one-vote, it will be about the size of a company's bank

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account."

Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., agreed with Sanders, saying the court's decision rescinded 100 years of campaign finance law.

"The Supreme Court's decision to reverse a century of practice and precedent opened the door to a flood of corporate cash," he said. "If we don't act soon to reduce the impact of this misguided decision, the voices of ordinary Americans will be drowned out by special interests."

The Disclose Act requires a company CEO to appear in campaign advertisements to approve the message, much like the current conditions for candidates. The bill also intensifies disclosure to the election commission, tightens coordination rules within 90 days of a general vote, and requires businesses, unions and special interest groups to report contributions to shareholders and membership,

While the measure received a scarce amount of bipartisan support, Republicans listed several concerns during the buildup to the legislation.

Supporters of the court decision said back-pedaling now would suppress free speech and violate the principles of federalism while potentially adding financial loopholes for labor unions, a strong voting block for Democrats.

"This bill, like many that have come before it, is an incumbent-protection power grab dressed up in the sheep's clothing of 'reform.' The bureaucratic jungle that this bill would create will force groups of modest means like Citizens United to spend thousands of dollars of donor money on a battery of attorneys and accountants," said David Bossie, president of Citizens United, in a statement. "This is precisely what the Supreme Court in *Citizens United v. FEC* sought to avoid."

Senate Democrats attempted to find some of their conservative counterparts, such as newcomer Scott Brown of Massachusetts and former presidential candidate John McCain of Arizona, to co-sponsor the bill, yet failed to recruit a single GOP delegate.

The House Democrats found more support for the legislation among Republicans -- Reps. Michael Castle of Delaware and Walter Jones of North Carolina were lead sponsors of the bill.

After the conservative action group Citizens United won in a 5 to 4 decision, Republicans hailed it as a solid victory for the First Amendment and 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 January ruling. "This decision is a victory on behalf of those who cherish the fundamental freedoms protected by the First Amendment."

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, has been a leading opponent of the decision. He said the new legislation will fortify several areas of the campaign finance laws to ensure individual voters take on the primary role in the electoral process.

"It is difficult to overstate the potential for corrosive harm embodied in this stunning decision. It threatens a dimming of our democratic ideals, a corruption of the practical functioning of our election and political systems and a deflating blow to the court's most precious asset, its own credibility, based on the public's trust," said Leahy.

If the Disclose Act continues to swiftly move forward, it could influence campaign spending during November's election cycle, however the bill is also very likely to face challenges from Senate Republicans and the judiciary system in upcoming weeks.