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The Limits of Campaign Cash

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 22, 2010 NCR Today

The Supreme Court?s decision to allow corporations and unions to spend unlimited amounts on federal campaigns is a bad decision. Quick question for the Catholic Answers crowd: If a corporation is an individual under the Constitution, and you drive one out of business, is it murder?

Seriously, about the last thing Washington needs is more special interest money running around. But, the effects of the decision remain to be seen and while some of them are foreseeably baneful, this is not the end of the world.

It turns out that the value of money is wildly overstated in political campaigns. As newspapers and magazines are learning, advertising revenue is not what it once was and the reason is that more and more people get their information off the internet. The same goes for television advertising: With cable channels of every variety, it is harder and harder to broadcast a message and advertising on channels that microcast is not nearly as expensive.

The one undeniable value of money is that it can be used to increase name recognition. Also, to perpetuate a nasty, negative campaign, to spread bad information. Other than that, there are limits on what money can buy in politics, and those limits have nothing to do with the Constitution. Ask Sen. Chris Dodd. He had a boatload of campaign cash, but no amount of money was going to dispel the negative impression that his constituents had of his conduct, an impression that was largely off-base but was nonetheless indelible. And, corporations could already use their money to frame issues.

So, yes, the decision was bad. But, money alone will not make the Republicans look credible on health care reform or the Democrats look persuasive on the right-to-life.

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