

SENATE MAJORITY LEADER HARRY REID
REMARKS AT JUDICIARY COMMITTEE HEARING
TUESDAY, JUNE 3, 2014

Chairman Leahy, Ranking Member Grassley, and members of the committee, thank you for allowing me to be here today.

I am here because the flood of dark money into our nation's political system poses the greatest threat to our democracy that I have witnessed during my time in public service. The decisions by the Supreme Court have left the American people with a status quo in which one side's billionaires are pitted against the other side's billionaires.

So we sit here today faced with a simple choice: We can keep the status quo and argue all day about whose billionaires are right – or, we can work together to change the system, to get this shady money out of our democracy and restore the basic principle of one American, one vote.

I've been asking Nevadans to vote for me for decades, and I've seen firsthand how this dark money is perverting our political process.

I ran for re-election in 1998 against John Ensign, 5 years before the passage of McCain-Feingold. That election was a miserable experience, for both my opponent and me, because of the influence of special interests. In 2004, after we passed McCain-Feingold, the campaign felt as if the air had been cleared. But by 2010, following the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision, the situation was as bad as ever. Corporations and special interests were meddling in races like never before.

It has only gotten worse since.

During the 2012 presidential campaign, outside groups spent more than \$1 billion. That's about as much outside spending as took place in the previous 10 elections, combined. But this spike in the amount of shadowy money being pumped into elections is not surprising. Recent decisions rendered by the United States Supreme Court, such as the *Citizens United* and *McCutcheon* cases, have eviscerated our campaign finance laws and opened the floodgates for special interests.

The cynics may scoff at the idea of us working together on an issue as critical as good government, but it wasn't all that long ago that the issue of campaign finance reform enjoyed support from both Democrats and Republicans. Campaign finance reform has been proposed a number of times before – even by my counterpart, Senator McConnell.

In 1988, Senator McConnell's own constitutional amendment empowered Congress to enact laws regulating the amount of independent expenditures. In advocating for reform, Senator McConnell said:

“We Republicans have put together a responsible and Constitutional campaign reform agenda. It would restrict the power of special interest PACS, stop the flow of all soft money, keep wealthy individuals from buying public office.”

Senator McConnell had the right idea then. I am optimistic that we can find a way to rekindle those noble principles in him now. I find it hard to fathom that my Republican colleagues would want to defend the status quo. Do any members of this committee really think the status quo is working?

Although he opposed billionaires using their own money to run for office, Senator McConnell now supports billionaires' ability to fund today's campaigns and independent expenditures. In fact, Sen. McConnell even declares that, *“In our society, spending is speech.”* How could everyday, working American families afford to make their voices heard, if money equals free speech? American families can't compete with billionaires.

Yet my Republican colleagues attempt to cloak their defense of the status quo in terms of noble principles. They defend the money pumped into our system by the Koch brothers and others as “free speech.” This constitutional amendment is about restoring freedom of speech to all Americans.

The Supreme Court has effectively said, the more money you have the more speech you get, and the more influence in our democracy. That is wrong. Our involvement in government should not be dependent on our bank account balances.

The American people reject the notion that money gives the Koch brothers, corporations or special interest groups a greater voice in government than American voters. They believe, as I do, that elections in our country should be decided by voters - those Americans who have a constitutional, fundamental right to elect their representatives. The Constitution doesn't give corporations a vote, and it doesn't give dollar bills a vote.

The “undue influence” that my friend decried three decades ago has not magically transformed into free speech. It is still bad for America. We must undo the damage done by the Supreme Court's recent campaign finance decisions. And we need to do it now.

I support this constitutional amendment, proposed by Senators Tom Udall and Michael Bennet, which grants Congress the authority to regulate and limit the raising and spending of money for federal political campaigns. Senators Udall and Bennet's amendment will rein in the massive spending of Super PACs, which has grown exponentially since the Citizens United decision. It also provides states with the authority to institute campaign spending limits at the state level.

Simply put, a constitutional amendment is what this nation needs to bring sanity back to political campaigns and restore Americans' confidence in their elected leaders.

The American people want change. They want their place in government to be protected.

Free speech shouldn't cost the American voter a dime.