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'Super PACs' and More: Politics, Money and Language

Reuters
Republican candidates debate in New Hampshire

STEVE EMBER: Welcome to THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English. I'm Steve Ember.

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: And I'm Shirley Griffith. This week on our program, we talk about politics, money and language.

(MUSIC)

STEVE EMBER: Two years ago this month, the United States Supreme Court decided a campaign finance case known as "Citizens United."

The court said the government may continue to limit direct donations to political candidates by corporations and unions. However, the justices said the government may not limit spending on independent efforts to support or oppose candidates.

The court said these limits violate the Constitution's right of free speech. The majority ruled that corporations have the same rights to free speech in political campaigns as individuals do. The vote was five to four.

The case resulted from a lawsuit against the Federal Election Commission by a conservative group called Citizens United. The ruling has cleared the way for unrestricted donations to groups known as "super PACs," or political action

committees. These super PACs are supposed to work independently of campaigns, though some include former aides to the candidates they support.

The effects of "Citizens United" can be seen in the race for the Republican presidential nomination. Super PACs have been spending millions of dollars on television advertising. The Supreme Court found nothing wrong with requirements to identify who is paying for political ads. But, given the timing of reports, voters might not know who the donors were until after they vote in a primary.

Newt Gingrich is an example of a candidate who supported the "Citizens United" decision, them became a victim of it.

FEMALE VOICE: "Ever notice how some people make a lot of mistakes?"

NEWT GINGRICH: "It was probably a mistake."

Mr. Gingrich became the target of attack ads before the recent Iowa caucuses. The former speaker of the House of Representatives had been leading in public opinion polls in that state. However, he finished fourth in the voting. Ads paid for by allies of Mitt Romney are widely seen as having played a big part.

New York City Councilman Charles Barron, a Democrat, says the situation is ironic.

CHARLES BARRON: "And it couldn't have happened to a better person than Newt Gingrich [laughs], because this was a person who supported corporate elites having their way and contributing as much as they want to campaigns. Now it turned around to bite him."

And now a pro-Newt Gingrich super PAC aims to bite the Romney campaign with a half-hour film called "When Mitt Romney Came to Town." The group, Winning Our Future, presents him as a "corporate raider" when he led Bain Capital, an investment company. It says he profited while people lost their jobs in the companies he bought and sold.

MITT ROMNEY: "Everything corporations earn ultimately goes to the people."

CROWD: [Laughter]

MITT ROMNEY: "Where do you think it goes?"

CROWD: "Into their pockets!"

MITT ROMNEY: "Whose pockets? Whose pockets?"

ANNOUNCER: "A story of greed, playing the system for a quick buck, a group of corporate raiders led by Mitt Romney, more ruthless than Wall Street."

STEVE EMBER: On Friday, Newt Gingrich said the film contained mistakes and he called on Winning Our Future to either remove them or not run the film.

VOICE TWO: The New York City Council has passed a resolution that calls for amending the United States Constitution. The proposed amendment would declare that corporations do not have the same rights as people. It would declare that money is not a constitutionally protected form of speech. Los Angeles, the nation's second largest city, has passed a similar resolution. So have other cities including Albany, New York; Boulder, Colorado; and South Miami, Florida.

STEVE EMBER: Eric Ulrich is a Republican member of the New York City Council. He voted against the resolution targeting corporate political spending.

ERIC ULRICH: "Because it's just as important, even if you don't agree with it, as the influence labor organizations and other groups may have. You have to create an equal playing field and zeroing out one group simply because we don't agree with them just to help another -- that's not fair, that's not American."

Some people think the solution is to have public financing of campaigns. Jonah Minkoff-Zern represents the group Public Citizen.

JONAH MINKOFF-ZERN: "Our voice and our vote doesn't matter the same way that someone who has so many resources to devote to a campaign, whether it's a wealthy individual or a mega-corporation."

Last week, the Supreme Court made another ruling related to the issue of money and political influence. It dismissed an appeal seeking to expand the ability of foreigners to contribute to American political campaigns.

The justices upheld a federal court judgment in support of a ban on foreign contributions from all but immigrants who live permanently in the United States. A three-judge court ruled that Congress was acting within its powers when it banned most foreigners from donating to campaigns.

The Supreme Court upheld the ruling by the three-judge panel without further comment.

(MUSIC)

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: The United States has a long process for choosing candidates to run for president every four years.

The first voting of this election season took place on January third in Iowa at local political meetings known as caucuses. Mitt Romney, a former Massachusetts governor, finished just eight votes ahead of former Pennsylvania senator Rick Santorum.

Iowa traditionally holds the first caucuses, while New Hampshire holds the first primary election. In primaries in other states, voters who are registered with a political party can only vote for candidates from that party. But in some states, including New Hampshire, people can vote in primaries even if they are not registered with a party.

The next primary is this Saturday in South Carolina. Since nineteen eighty no Republican presidential candidate has won the nomination without winning South Carolina.

Professor Candice Nelson at American University in Washington is an expert on elections.

CANDICE NELSON: "The purpose of the primary season is to enable candidates to introduce themselves to the voters, to let the voters get to know the candidates, to think about the candidates over the course of three or four months."

STEVE EMBER: Many of the people who attend campaign rallies and other events do not just want to shake hands with a candidate. They want answers on issues. Phil Elliott is a political reporter with the Associated Press.

PHIL ELLIOTT: "They go to these events. They pack the coffee shops. They wait for hours to meet the candidates and ask them very serious and substantive questions."

The traditional period of three or four months when states hold primaries and caucuses has been shrinking in recent presidential elections. States have been setting earlier and earlier dates in hopes of gaining greater visibility and power in deciding a party's nominee.

Some people think all fifty states should hold their primaries or caucuses on the same day -- a so-called national primary.

Mark Rom is a political scientist at Georgetown University in Washington.

MARK ROM: "The main advantage of a national primary is that the voters, the

votes from individuals across the nation, would count equally toward choosing the presidential candidates. That would be a good thing. The bad thing about a national primary is it would give special advantages to those who have raised the most money, and those who have the highest popularity when the race starts."

During the primary season, people are choosing a candidate but really they are voting for delegates for that candidate. The idea is that the candidate with the most delegates becomes the party's nominee. But the nominee is not officially chosen until the delegates gather for the party's national convention.

The conventions takes place about two months before the general election in early November. The Republican National Convention will take place in the Tampa Bay area in Florida at the end of August. The Democratic National Convention is in Charlotte, North Carolina, in the first week of September.

(MUSIC)

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: Twenty-eleven is over, but some of the words that came to define the past year of political protests around the world may live on. Grant Barrett is host of the public radio program "A Way with Words" and vice president of the American Dialect Society. That group chose "occupy" as its Word of the Year.

GRANT BARRETT: "And this was used in phrases like Occupy Wall Street or Occupy San Francisco, or frankly 'occupy' just about any place. And this was a word coined by an organization in Canada called Adbusters, which started a campaign last summer to get people in October to protest in the streets, to protest the unfair distribution of wealth and the unfair distribution of power, and 'occupy' really has had a lot of legs, as they say -- a lot of life."

Grant Barrett says it can work with lots of other words.

GRANT BARRETT: "And so, in that way, 'occupy' has become what we call a combining form. So it can be combined with verbs and nouns and adjectives in order to create new phrases and new expressions that filter throughout the whole movement."

Activists in the Occupy movement call themselves the "ninety-nine percenters."

(SOUND : "We are the ninety-nine percent")

GRANT BARRETT: " And there is one percent of the population -- the 'one-percenters' -- who seem to have all the money and all the power and all the control."

The Occupy movement has borrowed methods and terms from protests of the past. Mr. Barrett points to the use of the so-called human megaphone.

(SOUND)

GRANT BARRETT: "In order not to violate laws about electronic amplification, what they would do is a speaker would say something. They would say, 'I would like to tell you my opinion,' and the whole crowd repeats exactly what the speaker just said to make sure that everyone else who is farther away can hear it."

The protesters have also used non-verbal communication. Crossing your arms in front of your chest is called a "hard block" and means "firm opposition." Occupiers have also used "twinkling" similar to a hand motion that deaf people use to signal applause.

GRANT BARRETT: "It looks kind of like if you hold our hands up in the air and you face your palms outward and you kind of waggle your hands a little bit, you kind of shake them, that's 'twinkling.' And this is really interesting from a language point of view. It's borrowed from American Sign Language, because that is the way you applaud in ASL. It's interesting stuff!"

Another widely used term in twenty-eleven was Arab Spring.

GRANT BARRETT: "In this two-word phrase we have encapsulated, we've made shorthand for, a lot of really important history."

(MUSIC)

STEVE EMBER: We had reporting by Peter Fedynsky, Jeffrey Young and Adam Phillips, and help from Brianna Blake. I'm Steve Ember.

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: And I'm Shirley Griffith. You can download texts and MP3s of our programs, get English teaching activities and subscribe to our podcasts at voaspecialenglish.com. You can also join us on Facebook and Twitter at VOA Learning English. Join us again next week for THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English.