

U.S. Supreme Court ruling will affect N.C. elections

Thursday, January 21, 2010

(Updated Friday, January 22 - 8:04 am)

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Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — A U.S. Supreme Court ruling Thursday giving businesses and unions more ability to influence federal elections also stands to increase their sway in North Carolina for state and legislative elections.

North Carolina has a law similar to a federal one that had barred corporations and unions from using money from their general treasuries to produce and run campaign ads to endorse or oppose a candidate.

The state law, which also applies to insurance companies, now appears unenforceable given that a majority of the justices struck down the federal law on grounds of protecting political speech, State Board of Elections executive director Gary Bartlett said.

"It will take several readings and meetings with different people to try to understand the full meaning of the decision," Bartlett said, but "it will certainly change the landscape in terms of who gives and the impact."

Now unions and corporations will have fewer restrictions on spending for politics and more choices than employee-funded political action committees or alternative organizations to make political statements.

Dana Cope, executive director of the State Employees Association of North Carolina, said he welcomed the change and expected to spend more in primary elections for legislative races. The association generally gives money to candidates from its political action committee but now will have more options.

"It's going to allow us to be free to spend more resources," Cope said.

Bartlett said he expected more businesses and unions to make "independent expenditures" by spending money to run commercials that directly support or oppose a candidate. The spending can't be coordinated with candidates or other political committees.

State laws remain intact that ban corporations and unions from giving directly to candidates and require disclosure of who is paying for independent expenditures and how the money is spent.

The General Assembly will have to decide whether it wants to try to place a limit on how much corporations and unions can spend. Individuals are limited to giving \$4,000 to a candidate per election, for example.

The State Board of Elections or Bartlett could set temporary rules on corporation donations for the 2010 elections since lawmakers aren't scheduled to return to Raleigh until the week after the May 4 primary.

The North Carolina Chamber is closely watching the issue, spokeswoman Sherry Melton said.

"Whatever the rules are or however they may change, the most important thing is that they apply equally to everyone — that should be the ultimate goal," Melton said.

Campaign reform advocates lamented the court's decision and said it would give corporate interests a larger megaphone through which to attempt to persuade voters and challenge elected officials who oppose their views.

Damon Circosta, executive director of the North Carolina Center for Voter Education said he hopes the ruling will build interest in the Legislature for expanding publicly financed campaigns. North Carolina already permits candidates for appellate court judgeships and select Council of State races to receive public funds in exchange for fundraising restrictions.

"It's even more important now than ever that we can get going on an alternative to the special interest money chase," Circosta said.

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