

Statement of U.S. Senator Bernard Sanders
House Parties and Occupy Events on *Citizens United*
November 9, 2011

Hello everybody!

Thank you very much for coming together tonight on this very important issue.

Thanks to Public Citizen, Common Cause, People for the American Way, Move to Amend, and Free Speech for People for putting it together.

Congratulations to Boulder, Colorado, for passing a resolution last week by a 3 to 1 margin calling for an amendment to the US Constitution that would state what everybody joining us across the country tonight already knows, and what the vast majority of the American people also believe. And that is that corporations are not people, should not be treated as if they were people, and that corporations do not have a first amendment right of free speech to spend as much money as they want on campaigns.

Also, congratulations to the people of Ohio, who yesterday showed what a strong, grassroots movement can do against right-wing extremism and, by the way, who literally had to take on the Citizens United *organization* which put a substantial amount of money into that campaign. The people of Ohio defeated Citizens United last night, and our job is to defeat this absurd *Citizens United* Supreme Court decision.

I also want to say hello to our friends who are occupying Wall Street ... *and Albany and Albuquerque and Allentown and Chicago and Columbus and Los Angeles and Miami and Orange County and San Luis Obispo and Seattle and Washington, DC!*

You are all part of one of the most important grassroots movements in decades, which is coming together to say enough is enough with the greed, recklessness and illegal behavior on Wall Street that plunged our country into the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression! Enough is enough of 25 million people who are unemployed or under-employed and enough is enough for the millions of people who lost their homes, life savings, or the ability to send their kids to college! Enough is enough for a nation today that has the most unequal distribution of wealth and income of any major country on Earth, and which has the dubious distinction of seeing a huge increase of the number of billionaires at the same time that we have the highest rate of childhood poverty of any major country!

As you all know, almost two years ago, in its now-infamous Citizens United decision, the United States Supreme Court upended over a century of precedent, taking a somewhat narrow legal question and using it as an opportunity to radically change our political landscape, unleashing a tsunami of corporate spending on campaign ads that has just begun. Make no mistake: The Citizens United ruling has radically changed our democracy -- further tilting the balance of power toward the rich and corporate America.

While there is no way of knowing for sure, since there are no disclosure requirements in place to track what was spent, it's no secret that in the 2010 mid-term election corporations and some very wealthy individuals spent a huge and unprecedented amount of money to further their political goals - and there is no question that it was just the very beginning of their efforts.

At a time when corporations have over \$2 trillion dollars in cash in the bank and are making record profits, the American people should be concerned when

the Supreme Court says these corporations have a constitutionally-protected right to spend, spend, spend shareholders money to dominate an election, as if they are real live persons. There will be no end to the impact that corporate interests can have on our campaigns and our democracy.

Let's think for a minute about the impact of the *Citizens United* decision on the ground, in real life.

Very few people think that the campaign finance system we had in place before *Citizens United* was all that good. It wasn't. In order to raise money for campaigns, candidates had to spend an inordinate amount of time raising money to get elected – going to fundraisers, getting on the plane raising money, or currying favor with those who could help.

In other words, what we had in the past was terrible. What we have now, because of the disastrous *Citizens United* decision, is much, much worse. Let's be clear, what the Supreme Court has said is that billionaires and large corporations have the right to spend unlimited sums of money, without disclosure, to buy elections. Does anybody in their right mind think that this is what American democracy is supposed to be about?

Let me tell you exactly how this process is working today and will work in the future. It means that a handful of billionaires and corporate leaders will sit in a room and decide to put \$10 million to Vermont, \$100 million into California, and \$50 million into Ohio. They set up some phony organization called "Citizens for a Better America," or whatever, and nobody will ever learn where that money came from. This is not only enormously undemocratic in terms of elections, but let me tell you the impact that it has on the day-to-day workings of Congress.

What this means is that candidates are going to have to spend even more time and energy raising even more money to combat this huge infusion of corporate advertising. More time and energy raising money means less time and focus on addressing the real issues facing ordinary Americans.

But it's even worse than that. Citizens United means that every time a senator or a congressman casts a vote, he or she has to look over his or her shoulder and be thinking: if I vote for this, will there suddenly be a huge flow of money coming into my state or district to defeat me? Should I cast that vote?

Six huge financial institutions on Wall Street control an amount of assets equal to over 65% of our GDP – over \$9 trillion. In other words, just these financial interests on Wall Street have unlimited, absolutely unlimited financial resources to defeat those candidates who are opposed to their agenda. Do I really want to take them on? Sadly, many of our elected officials will say no, will vote the wrong way, or will do their best to make sure that important legislation never sees the light of day. And that's just Wall Street financial matters.

The drug companies charge us the highest rates in the world for prescription drugs. Do I really want to fight to lower drug prices in America when the extraordinarily profitable pharmaceutical industry can spend millions against me?

Our health care system is the most wasteful and expensive in the world. We are the only major nation without a national health care program guaranteeing health care to all. Do I really want to take on the private insurance companies and support a Medicare-for-All single payer health care system when it is so vigorously opposed by the private insurance companies?

We have tripled military spending since 1997 and now spend more money on defense than the rest of the world combined. Do I really want to fight to cut military spending when defense contractors have huge resources to deploy against me?

And on and on it goes.

So, we have got to fight back and that is exactly what you are doing tonight and what you'll be doing tomorrow and until we win this enormously important battle to maintain the basic tenets of our democracy!

There isn't one solution to the terrible effects of the *Citizens United* decision or to the more fundamental and shocking ideas that drove it that have now become the law of the land. For a start, I support three pieces of existing legislation that would begin to get a handle on the problem

One is the DISCLOSE Act, sponsored by Senator Schumer, which would force corporations spending money on campaign ads to disclose their identity, just as candidates have to do, and to let their shareholders know what they are doing with their money.

Another is the Fair Elections Now Act, sponsored by Senator Durbin, which would move us finally to publicly-financed elections! It would allow federal candidates to run for office without relying on large contributions, big money bundlers, or donations from lobbyists, and to be freed from the constant fundraising in order to focus on what people in their communities want.

The third piece of legislation is a recent resolution for a campaign finance constitutional amendment, introduced by Senator Udall of New Mexico, that would make it clear that Congress and the states have the authority to write laws to regulate campaign spending across the country and make sure our state and

federal elections are about what's right for our democracy, not just what's right for millionaires and billionaires and large corporations.

But even these excellent pieces of legislation are not enough. When the Supreme Court says that for purposes of the First Amendment corporations are people, that spending money should be treated as free speech, and that attempts by the federal government and states to impose reasonable restrictions on campaign ads are unconstitutional, something more needs to be done, something more fundamental and indisputable, that cannot be turned on its head by a right wing court.

There was a big win in Boulder last week and there is a movement growing in our country to pass a constitutional amendment that says, simply and straightforwardly, what everybody except five members of the Supreme Court understands - that corporations are not people.

I look forward to working with you to make sure that happens.