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Citizens United: Bad for Small Business and Bad for Democracy

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Freddy Castiblanco, owner of Terraza 7 Live Music in Elmhurst, NY and member of the steering committee of the Main Street Alliance, is the co-author of this opinion.

Two years ago last week, the Supreme Court handed down the Citizens United decision, paving the way for unlimited corporate spending in elections. In 2012, the decision's affects are more apparent

than ever; the Republican presidential nominee may very well be chosen by a Super PAC, rather than everyday citizens. But the full scope of the damage caused by this decision is only just beginning to be felt, especially at the local level. Among the victims of mega-corporate power will not only be everyday citizens and their elections, but also small businesses in our country.

New data from a national poll of small business owners shows that Citizens United was viewed negatively by an overwhelming 66 percent of the 500 survey participants. Their chief concern was one that most Americans share, including 88 percent of small business owners: with more money in politics, more special privileges are likely to be doled out to those who could pay-to-play. And note that since January 2010, almost \$6 billion has been spent on lobbying activities, according to opensecret.org, and at a time when the Congress is debating whose subsidies to preserve, what industries to aid, and which businesses to regulate.

The Citizens United decision stacks the deck further in the favor of big business by allowing money to dictate what is important in elections, who candidates have to please to get elected, and what sort of policy is pursued after they win. Let me assure you, what is good for Terraza 7, a local NYC performance venue, is rarely what is good for Madison Square Garden or Yankee Stadium. But how can Terraza 7 make that point effectively if money is speech and they have less of it?

When the New York City Council passed the Progressive Caucus-sponsored resolution condemning corporate personhood and called for a constitutional amendment process to permanently halt undue corporate influence in elections, they were taking a stand for fairness. The residents of NYC poorest neighborhoods will not be making unlimited donations to Super PACs anytime soon, nor will many of NYCs small businesses. In fact the types of policy and candidates corporate dollars back will almost certainly run counter to what the residents of and employers in NYC poorest and most working class districts really need: good paying jobs, strong public schools and safe and healthy homes.

We need to restore transparency to the system so we know who's interests are running the campaigns, so we can make clear eyed decisions about the positions myself and other elected officials take. Small business owners also know the value of transparency. To quote one owner, "We build our businesses on the strength of our word." What's more, if there is any group of people who can speak to the importance of a society that provides individuals the opportunity to build their dreams with their own hands, it is small business owners. Restoring fairness to the system means protecting these entrepreneurs so that corporations and big money do not drown them out, so that our democracy functions like a democracy, where everyone has a say, regardless of your power, wealth, or social status. With Citizens United at two years old, we have much to do.

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