

## An Inauguration on the 15th Anniversary of Citizens United

Fifteen years after the Supreme Court's *Citizens United vs. FEC* ruling reshaped campaign finance law, the 2024 election season has wrapped up. Former President Donald Trump's second inauguration is just days away, and looking back at *Citizens United* reveals a lot about the political landscape we find ourselves in today. According to OpenSecrets, the 2024 election cycle saw an estimated \$15.9 billion in total spending across all federal races, exceeding the 2020 cycle's then-record of about \$15 billion (1).

Back when *Citizens United* gave corporations the right to unlimited independent political expenditures in 2010, no one fully predicted the immense amount of money that would flood into elections. Now, not only are there massive Super PACs raising enormous sums to run ads, but there are also groups—such as 501(c)s—that don't always have to disclose their donors. This means voters are faced with a barrage of political messaging across TV, social media, and even their favorite streaming platforms, courtesy of entities most of us can't name.

The steady expansion of corporate and special interest spending was on full display in 2024. Candidates from both major parties harnessed huge war chests, with many campaigns benefiting from corporate-linked funds. Local and state races saw a bump in spending compared to previous cycles, suggesting that the *Citizens United* ripple effect spans across the electoral map. For instance, the pivotal Ohio Senate race saw outside spending approach \$300 million (2).

The dust has just settled on most of these races, and we're already seeing post-election analysis about who gave how much, to whom, and why it made the difference (or didn't). Some groups are calling for new transparency laws, pushing for full disclosure of all donors. Others maintain the Supreme Court got it right, believing that if you try to limit who can pay for speech, you're essentially limiting the speech itself. It's a debate that feels both rooted in the American tradition of free expression and also entangled in some of our most pressing modern issues, like data privacy and corporate influence.

And now, with the country preparing for another presidential inauguration for Donald Trump—something that, not too long ago, felt like it wouldn't ever happen again—both sides of the *Citizens United* debate are asking the same questions. Did unfettered corporate and private wealth tip the scales in key battleground states? Does the sheer volume of money automatically drown out less financially endowed candidates, even if they have strong grassroots support? Or is all this spending simply an amplified version of political speech, giving voters more information (for better or worse) to help them decide?

### Sources:

(1) [Open Secrets](#)

(2) [USA Today](#)