

IS MONEY SPEECH?

THIS ACTIVITY SHOULD TAKE ABOUT 90 MINUTES. IF LEARNERS ARE ABLE TO REVIEW MEDIA PRIOR TO THE LESSON, ACTIVITY TIME SHOULD BE 45 TO 60 MINUTES.

INVESTIGATE

Read, watch, and listen to the three media resources on the Thinkalong module. Learners can use the Investigate graphic organizer to summarize each piece of media and record new information. Below are summaries of the three pieces of media curated in the Thinkalong module.

MITCH MCCONNELL HAS LONG ARGUED FOR MORE MONEY IN POLITICS

NPR: Politics | August 1, 2019 | Audio
8:16 minutes

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell's decades long fight with Sen. John McCain on money in politics hit its peak with a tobacco industry scandal. NPR reports.

- Mitch McConnell, Senate majority leader, has long supported the idea of money in politics. In his view, spending money on politics is a fundamental First Amendment right. He says that money helps politicians to remain in power by seeking out donations for essential services like putting out flyers or broadcasting advertisements.
- However, one fellow Republican, John McCain, continues to call for strict limits placed on money in politics to stop corruption. Almost every year in the late 1980s and in the 1990s, McConnell helped to successfully block tough campaign finance regulations.
- In McConnell's home state, Kentucky, the tobacco industry has donated more than \$600,000 in campaign contributions. According to internal tobacco industry documents, McConnell gave Senate speeches that were written by tobacco industry lobbyists.
- In response to these allegations, McConnell stated that he was defending the livelihood of the 60,000 people in Kentucky who are employed by the tobacco industry.
- In 1998, John McCain introduced a bill to reduce teen smoking and tightly regulate the industry by raising the price of cigarettes. McConnell opposed the bill introduced by McCain, arguing that it was an unnecessary tax on smokers. The bill narrowly failed in the Senate.
- The Wall Street Journal reported that on the day of the vote, McConnell had told other Republican senators that anyone who voted against the bill would receive financial support from the tobacco industry for ads to help their reelection campaigns. A few months after McConnell helped defeat the tobacco bill, he was petitioning at least one tobacco company for a major political donation of \$200,000 to the Republican party.
- McCain did eventually pass a campaign finance law. However, in 2010, in the Citizens United Case, the Supreme Court decided to allow unlimited corporate and union spending on elections.

Using public media — video, audio and digital reports — about newsworthy topics, these classroom-based exercises help learners to think critically about media messages, develop informed opinions, and practice how to take a stand.

THE LANDSCAPE FOR CAMPAIGN FINANCE, 10 YEARS AFTER CITIZENS UNITED

All Things Considered | January 21, 2020 | Audio

3:58 minutes

Ari Shapiro talks with Stanford Law School's Nate Persily about the effect of Citizens' United v. FEC on campaign finance in the 10 years after the ruling.

- Persily says that the Citizens United decision cleared the way for corporations to spend as much money as they wanted on politics and election activities.
- While corporations haven't totally taken that action, rich individuals are spending more money through SuperPACs.
- The Citizens United decision has allowed rich individuals to play a larger role in the campaign finance system, but it's also raised the profile of small-donor fundraising to combat the corporate and individual interest money in politics.
- Persily says that the internet has had a huge impact on campaign finance and fundraising – it allows candidates to reach lots of people without spending campaign money on travel or traditional advertising.
- The effect of Citizens United isn't only on Presidential campaigns, but is playing a role in Senate and House of Representatives races, especially for competitive seats.
- There has been a move toward "dark money" organizations which don't have much transparency, but the Citizens United decision does allow states or the federal government to be more aggressive toward transparency and disclosure.
- Persily says that the most transparency around campaign financing has instead been through internet companies that provide digital advertising and require information about who is spending money to advertise on their platforms.

UNDERSTANDING CAMPAIGN FINANCE LAW

PBS NewsHour Extra | June 7, 2016 | Article

The debate over campaign finance and whether money constitutes free speech is hotly contested. PBS uncovers the history of campaign finance laws and their effect upon elections today.

- The debate over campaign finance was a major point of controversy during the 2016 election season when Senator Bernie Sanders criticized Secretary Hilary Clinton for her use of wealthy donors during the election.
- It's crucial to have a good understanding of campaign finance law so that voters can comprehend the constraints of the law.
- In 1971, the Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA) was created by Congress to regulate campaign finance. One of the most important parts of FECA was a disclosure requirement regarding all contributions with information about donors. This meant that wealthy Americans could no longer act as candidates' secret supporters
- FECA also limited how much individuals, special interest groups, and political action committees (PACs) could donate to campaigns.
- In 1976, FECA allowed loopholes in the campaign finance system, such as "soft money" and advertising by tax-exempt advocacy groups. There was no limit placed on individuals or political parties who donated to issue advertising or get-out-the-vote advertising. These activities often boosted individual candidates by proxy. However, in 2002, the McCain-Feingold Act banned soft money.
- *Citizens United* allowed corporations to spend unlimited amounts on advertising and other tools to convince the people to vote in a certain way. Super PACs can now accept unlimited donations from the wealthiest Americans. Unfortunately, these unlimited sources of money have become closely tied to single candidates.

KEY WORDS

Look out for these important keywords in the news stories. Discuss the definitions with your classroom and see how they affect the understanding of the story.

- Deregulate
- Campaign
- Contributions
- Corruption
- Disclosure
- SuperPACs
- “Soft Money”
- Candidates
- First Amendment

CONTEMPLATE

Learners will use media literacy questions to critically engage with news by thinking about its purpose, searching for bias and discussing missing perspectives. They will answer the 5 Key Questions of Media Literacy created by the Center for Media Literacy, which are:

1. Who created this message?
2. What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?
3. How might different people understand this message differently than me?
4. What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?
5. Why is this message being sent?

A graphic organizer is included in this guide and the Thinkalong website to help learners answer these five questions about each piece of media.

DEBATE

Use the debate tool on the module webpage to help form evidence-based responses to the debate question.

Thinkalong is designed to help learners engage with real issues that are relevant to their lives. [Structured discussions](#) allow learners to practice their critical thinking skills through evidence-based debate with their peers. Discussions are designed to take about 30 minutes. Educators are encouraged to modify aspects that work best for their learners.

To encourage civil discourse, please review the [Code of Conduct](#) with your learners.