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Let the Spending Begin

The starter’s gun went off last week in the squalid new race for unlimited campaign cash. The Federal Election Commission approved the creation of two “independent” campaign committees, one each from the left and right, expressly designed to take advantage of the new world of no rules.

One committee is being set up by the Club for Growth, the conservative advocate for low taxes and less government. The other will be run by a new group with close ties to the Democrats called Commonsense Ten, which says it will raise money from individuals, corporations and unions. Because both are obviously completely independent and would never dream of coordinating their efforts with those of any political party, they will be able to spend unlimited amounts, thanks to the Supreme Court’s Citizens United decision earlier this year.

Both committees, and others like them, will also be able to collect unlimited checks from their donors. A little-noticed decision in March by the federal appeals court for the District of Columbia said there is no longer any basis for limiting contributions to independent committees, known as 527’s. The old contribution limit of $69,900 every two years apparently abridged the free speech rights of well-heeled donors.

So the sluice gates are open on both ends of these committees. The F.E.C., which at least tried to take a stand before the appeals court, now seems to have given up the fight. Five of the six commissioners voted to approve the new committees. The lone dissenter, Steven T. Walther, issued a stinging statement noting that the commission could have complied with the courts by removing the limits on contributions by individuals to 527’s, not the contributions of unions or corporations. Neither the March appellate decision nor Citizens United, he said, invalidated limits on the contributions to independent committees by corporations or unions.

That notion seems quaint in an era when millionaires are buying campaigns and corporate check writing is about to revert to Nixonian levels. A group set up by Karl Rove raised more than $5 million last month, and plans to raise $50 million to attack Democratic Congressional candidates. Democrats, led by the Service Employees International Union, are scrambling to
catch up.

You’re in great shape for the fall if you find the $30,400 individual limit to political parties just too constricting and can write six- or seven-figure checks to committees that are partisan in intent and deed. If your only playing field is the ballot box, then you are not.