

Big donors fear shakedown after decision

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The biggest Washington donors used to have a great excuse to keep their wallets closed when fundraisers came knocking: Sorry, I'm maxed out.

But a Supreme Court ruling swiped that line from them Wednesday when the justices tossed a rule that limited how much an individual can give to candidates, party committees and PACs.

Now, fundraisers hope donors, many of them lobbyists, will embrace their new legal right with gusto to give more across the board to candidates and party committees.

"I'm horrified, planning to de-list my phone number and destroy my email address," said Ken Kies, who, along with his wife, has bumped up against the federal political contribution limits. "What I was really hoping for is a ban on lobbyists making contributions entirely."

While it's an open question how much new money will come in, it's certain some will — and insiders are eager to make sure it greases the Washington economy.

"I'm poor again as a result," joked Tony Podesta, a top lobbyist and major donor who is among the small number of K-Streeters who contribute nearly the maximum amount to candidates each election cycle. "The fundraising consultants are the only winner in today's decision."

Podesta said for those donors, the new rule "eliminates an excuse that people have to say I'm done for the cycle and I can't do anymore, which means that people who do max out will end up giving more money than they used to to candidates."

The Supreme Court decision Wednesday is the latest in a line of rulings that loosen campaign finance rules and embolden the consultant class. Lobbyists are hit up for donations from campaign staff and members of Congress all the time. Now, it could just get worse they fear.

"We were already getting drained before, now it's another means to suck out more cash without any actual return on value," said one GOP lobbyist.

Roughly 600 donors maxed out on aggregate federal contributions during the 2012 election, according to data compiled by the Center for Responsive Politics. Of that total, about 160 were from Washington, Virginia, Maryland and New York — an indication that the decision could lead to more contributions from K Street and Wall Street.

Federal law had capped the total amount a single donor could give at \$48,600 to candidate committees and \$74,600 in contributions to PACs and party committees in each two-year cycle. Donors still can give only \$5,200 per candidate and \$32,400 to each party committee in the 2014 cycle.

Lobbyists argue they are already inundated by fundraising calls from lawmakers, email solicitations and events that fill their calendars for breakfasts, lunches and dinners in the run-up to the quarterly deadlines.

"For the lobbying community, it increases the cost of doing business," said David Rehr, a former association executive.

And the timing is particularly frustrating for some following the first-quarter filing deadline Monday.

"At this time in the cycle many lobbyists have hit or are quickly approaching the federal max," said David Thomas of Mehlman Vogel Castagnetti. "This decision is like getting to the end of the Marine Corps Marathon and being told you have to run it again."

On Capitol Hill the reaction was decidedly mixed with most Republicans cheering the decision.

Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) hailed the decision saying that “freedom of speech is being upheld,” though not all Republicans were supportive of the result.

Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), author of a 2002 ban on soft-money contributions, said he “wasn’t surprised” by the ruling, but warned that it would have negative long-term repercussions.

“There will be scandals because of this, I guarantee it,” McCain warned.

Sen. Angus King (I-Maine) wasted no time, introducing legislation Wednesday that would require all contributions of \$1,000 or more be filed with the Federal Election Commission within 48 hours