



FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION
Washington, DC 20463

April 22, 1999

CERTIFIED MAIL
RETURN RECEIPT REQUESTED

ADVISORY OPINION 1999-7

Mary Kiffmeyer
Secretary of State
State of Minnesota
100 Constitution Ave., 180 State Office Bldg.
St. Paul, MN 55155-1299

Dear Ms. Kiffmeyer:

This refers to your letter dated March 12, 1999, requesting an advisory opinion concerning the application of the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971, as amended ("the Act"), and Commission regulations to certain activities performed by your office to promote voter participation in Minnesota elections.

You state that the Secretary of State for Minnesota is authorized to sponsor or participate in nonpartisan activities that promote voter participation. See Minnesota Statutes, section 204B.27.¹ One of the activities your office sponsors is a web site that contains information about all candidates who have filed for Federal, State and county level offices.² You now propose to provide free hyperlinks between the web site maintained by your office and the web site of any candidate who provides your office with the Uniform Resource Locator (URL) for that candidate's web site. With the increasing use of the Internet and web sites, you anticipate that requests to provide these hyperlinks will be submitted by Federal candidates. You further explain that your office is also considering a disclaimer on its web site that would inform viewers that: (1)

¹ This subdivision specifically states: The secretary of state may sponsor or participate in nonpartisan activities to promote voter participation in Minnesota elections and efforts to increase voter registration and voter turnout.

² The Secretary of State's web site listing the 1998 candidates in Minnesota's nonfederal elections is: <http://www.sos.state.mn.us/elections/statewide.html>.

hyperlinks to candidate sites are done in reliance on the addresses (URLs) provided by the candidates; (2) the hyperlinks are displayed for voter information purposes and not to influence the nomination or election of a candidate; and (3) candidate web sites are not monitored or regulated by your office.

You ask whether this activity is permissible under the Act and Commission regulations. For the reasons discussed below, the Commission concludes that your described activity is permissible.

The core issue posed by your request is whether the disbursements or expenses of your office to perform the described activities would constitute an expenditure or contribution, as defined in the Act and Commission regulations. Both terms are similarly defined to include, in part, any gift or payment of money or anything of value “made by any person for the purpose of influencing any election for Federal office.” 2 U.S.C. §§431(8)(A)(i), 431(9)(A)(i).³ Commission regulations further define these terms stating that the provision of anything of value (to influence a Federal election) includes all in-kind contributions and that furnishing goods or services without charge is a covered expenditure, unless specifically exempted by the regulations. 11 CFR 100.8(a)(1)(iv)(A). The Commission has also previously concluded that the costs associated with the creation and maintaining of a web site could be considered an expenditure, based on the content of the site.⁴ However, even assuming some of the content of your web site could be read as for the purpose of influencing a Federal election, a specific exemption does apply in the situation presented here. The Act provides that the term “expenditure” does not include “nonpartisan activity designed to encourage individuals to vote or to register” to vote. 2 U.S.C. §431(9)(B)(ii). The regulations amplify this statutory exemption stating, in pertinent part, that: “Any cost incurred for activity designed to encourage individuals to register to vote or to vote is not an expenditure if no effort is or has been made to determine the party or candidate preference of individuals before encouraging them to register to vote or to vote.” 11 CFR 100.8(b)(3).

The information provided about Federal candidates in your proposal includes all candidates who qualify for the ballot and is pursuant to a State statutory directive to “sponsor or support nonpartisan activities that promote voter participation.” The providing of information in a nonpartisan manner about all ballot qualified candidates

³ The term “person” defined at 2 U.S.C. §431(8) includes an individual, partnership, committee, association, corporation, labor organization, or any other organization or group of persons, but such term does not include the Federal government or any authority of the Federal government. The Commission has not extended this exclusion to State governments or their instrumentalities. See Advisory Opinions 1977-22, 1982-26, 1984-48, and 1992-34. In Advisory Opinions 1977-22 and 1982-26, the Commission determined that State owned corporations were subject to the corporate prohibitions of section 441b. In Advisory Opinions 1984-48 and 1992-34, the Commission reviewed the proposals by State officeholders, who were Federal candidates, to reimburse their respective State governments for assistance and services provided to their Federal campaigns.

⁴ See Advisory Opinion 1998-22 concluding that a web site which includes express advocacy of the election or defeat of a clearly identified candidate is an expenditure (or an in-kind contribution).

running for office in Minnesota is a method encouraging participation in the political process and, as such, is viewed by the Commission as nonpartisan activity “designed to encourage individuals to vote or to register to vote.” The information on your site includes campaign mailing addresses and telephone numbers. The addition of campaign web addresses in the form of hyperlinks does not change this analysis. The Commission concludes, therefore, that your proposal would fall under the exemption from the definition of expenditure provided by section 431(9)(B)(ii) and would not be viewed as either an expenditure or contribution to a Federal candidate.⁵

This response constitutes an advisory opinion concerning the application of the Act, or regulations prescribed by the Commission, to the specific transaction or activity set forth in your request. See 2 U.S.C. §437f.

Sincerely,

(signed)

Scott E. Thomas
Chairman

Enclosures (AOs 1998-22, 1992-34, 1988-22, 1984-48, 1982-26, and 1977-22).

⁵ The Commission notes that 11 CFR 114.4(c)(3)(iii) permits the use of corporate funds to support State or local government agencies responsible for the administration of elections to help defray the costs of printing or distributing voter registration or voting information and forms. This regulation would not only permit corporate and labor organization donations to your office for the described activity, but it also implies that the underlying activity by the State or local agency is permissible under the Act.