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FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION
WASHINGTON, D.C.

February 15, 2024

ADVISORY OPINION 2024-02

Leilani Beaver, Esq.
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220 S. Pine St, Suite 109
Sisters, OR 97759

Dear Ms. Beaver:

We are responding to your advisory opinion request on behalf of Congresswoman Maxine Waters and Citizens for Waters (collectively, “Requestors”), concerning the application of the Federal Election Campaign Act, 52 U.S.C. §§ 30101-45 (the “Act”), and Commission regulations to Requestors’ proposal to solicit and receive reimbursement from non-federal sources of Requestors’ costs to design, print, and mail certain brochures.¹ The Commission concludes that the Act and Commission regulations would not prohibit Requestors from soliciting or receiving reimbursement of funds from the non-federal sources because the reimbursement of funds as proposed would comply with the source prohibitions, amount limitations, and reporting requirements of the Act.

Background

The facts presented in this advisory opinion are based on your letter received on January 25, 2024, and your email received on February 1, 2024.

Congresswoman Maxine Waters represents California’s 43rd District in the United States House of Representatives. Citizens for Waters is her principal campaign committee.

¹ The Commission has adopted the Requestors’ term “brochure” here as a matter of convenience, and notes that it used the same term in Advisory Opinion 2004-37 (Waters). The Commission has not determined, however, whether the Requestors’ publication is a “brochure” as that term is used in the Commission’s regulations. *See, e.g.*, 11 C.F.R. § 100.24(c)(4) (exempting certain communications, including certain brochures, from the definition of “federal election activity”).

Requestors intend to design, publish, and mail brochures featuring Congresswoman Waters's endorsements of federal and non-federal candidates, together with her positions of support for or opposition to ballot measures to be voted on the March 5, 2024, California primary ballot. Citizens for Waters will pay for the costs of designing, publishing, and mailing the brochures. The brochures will use the same design and layout as those described in Advisory Opinion 2004-37 (Waters). The space devoted to each candidate and ballot measure and its prominence on the brochure will be determined by the candidate's or ballot measure's prominence on the primary election ballot. As in Advisory Opinion 2004-37 (Waters), Requestors anticipate distributing at least 500 pieces of each version of their proposed brochure by U.S. Mail.

Requestors state that they will use only federally permissible funds to pay for the design, publishing, and mailing of the brochures.² Requestors propose to solicit and receive reimbursement from non-federal sources, however, for the portion of the brochures devoted to each non-federal candidate and ballot measure, as determined by the candidate's or ballot measure's pro rata share of the costs to design, publish, and mail the brochure.³ The non-federal sources from which Requestors propose to solicit and receive funds are (1) the featured non-federal candidates' personal funds, (2) the non-federal candidates' committees; (3) state independent expenditure-only political committees supporting or opposing the non-federal candidates; and (4) ballot measure committees supporting or opposing the featured ballot measures.

Citizens for Waters will invoice the non-federal candidates and committees for their pro rata share of the brochures' costs. Each invoice will state that Requestors are soliciting and will accept only federally permissible funds. The non-federal candidates and committees that reimburse Citizens for Waters will be required to submit signed invoices attesting that their payments are from federally permissible funds. Citizens for Waters will not accept any reimbursements that exceed the non-federal candidate's or committee's pro rata share of the costs. Congresswoman Waters will not establish, finance, maintain, or control any of the non-federal committees reimbursing Citizens for Waters.

Question Presented

May Citizens for Waters receive reimbursements from individuals, non-federal candidate committees, state independent expenditure-only political committees, and ballot measure committees to appear in the brochure using funds that do not exceed the

² Requestors state that the term "federally permissible funds" as used in their request means "funds that do not exceed the applicable contribution limitations of the Act and from sources that would not be prohibited under the Act from contributing directly to Congresswoman Waters." Advisory Opinion Request ("AOR") at AOR002 n.3.

³ Pro rata shares will be determined according to the "space or time" method described in 11 C.F.R. § 106.1(a).

applicable contribution limitations of the Act and from sources that would not be prohibited under the Act from contributing directly to Congresswoman Waters?

Legal Analysis

Citizens for Waters may solicit and receive reimbursements from non-federal candidates, non-federal candidate committees, state independent expenditure-only political committees, and ballot measure committees to appear in the proposed brochure if the non-federal sources' funds comply with the source prohibitions, amount limitations, and reporting requirements of the Act.

Under the Act, federal candidates and their committees may not “solicit, receive, direct, transfer, or spend funds in connection with an election for Federal office, including funds for any Federal election activity, unless the funds are subject to the [amount] limitations, [source] prohibitions, and reporting requirements of [the] Act.”⁴ The term “federal election activity” includes “a public communication that refers to a clearly identified candidate for Federal office (regardless of whether a candidate for State or local office is also mentioned or identified) and that promotes or supports a candidate for that office, or attacks or opposes a candidate for that office (regardless of whether the communication expressly advocates a vote for or against a candidate).”⁵ The term “public communication” includes a “communication by means of any . . . mass mailing, . . . or any other form of general public political advertising.”⁶ A “mass mailing” is “a mailing by United States mail or facsimile of more than 500 pieces of mail matter of an identical or substantially similar nature within any 30-day period.”⁷

Here, Requestors state that they anticipate distributing at least 500 pieces of each version of their proposed brochure by U.S. Mail. Such a distribution would be a “mass mailing” and, therefore, a public communication.⁸ Moreover, the brochures for which Requestors propose to obtain reimbursement would refer to and contain Congresswoman Waters’s endorsements of certain clearly identified candidates, including federal candidates.⁹

Regardless of whether the proposed brochure would qualify as “federal election activity” under the Act and Commission regulations, a question on which the Commission takes no position, Congresswoman Waters may solicit, receive, or spend

⁴ 52 U.S.C. § 30125(e)(1)(A).

⁵ 52 U.S.C. § 30101(20)(A)(iii); *see also* 11 C.F.R. § 100.24 (b)(3).

⁶ 11 C.F.R. § 100.26.

⁷ *Id.* § 100.27.

⁸ *See* Advisory Opinion 2004-37 (Waters) at 6.

⁹ AOR001-2.

funds as proposed if the funds comply with the Act's contribution limitations, source prohibitions, and reporting requirements.¹⁰ Requestors state that Citizens for Waters will invoice the non-federal candidates and committees featured in the brochures for their pro rata shares of the costs to design, publish, and mail the brochures, and that these invoices will state that Congresswoman Waters and Citizens for Waters will accept only "federally permissible funds." In addition, Requestors propose to require the non-federal candidates and committees reimbursing Citizens for Waters to submit signed invoices attesting that their payments are made with "federally permissible funds." Requestors explain that the term "federally permissible funds" as used in their request means "funds that do not exceed the applicable contribution limitations of the Act and from sources that would not be prohibited under the Act from contributing directly to Congresswoman Waters."¹¹

As part of their proposal for obtaining reimbursement from the non-federal candidates and committees, Requestors have stated that they will "only solicit[] and accept[] funds from federally permissible funds," and that they will require non-federal candidates and committees to "submit signed invoices attesting that their payment is from federally permissible funds when payment is received."¹² Accordingly, the funds used to reimburse Requestors will comply with the Act's source prohibitions and amount limitations. The only remaining question, then, is whether such reimbursement is also consistent with the Act's reporting requirements. The condition in 52 U.S.C. § 30125(e)(1)(A) that any funds solicited or received in connection with a federal election must be subject to the Act's reporting requirements does not itself impose any standalone duty to report that would not otherwise exist under the Act.¹³ Therefore, because the Act does not require non-federal candidates and committees to separately report their reimbursement of a federal candidate for their pro-rata share of the brochure, and provided that the non-federal committees are not otherwise required to report to the Commission,¹⁴ then such reimbursement is subject to the reporting requirements of the Act for the purposes of 52 U.S.C. § 30125(e)(1)(A). Citizens for Waters is separately

¹⁰ Although the Commission concluded in Advisory Opinion 2004-37 (Waters) that reimbursements to Congresswoman Waters's authorized committee for costs relating to similar brochures were not contributions to the committee, the restrictions of section 30125(e) extend beyond contributions to a federal candidate's committee, covering all funds that the candidate solicits, receives, directs, transfers, or spends in connection with an election for Federal office.

¹¹ AOR002 n.3.

¹² AOR002. The Requestors further clarify that "[f]ederally permissible funds means funds that do not exceed the applicable contribution limitations of the Act and from sources that would not be prohibited under the Act from contributing directly to Congresswoman Waters." *Id.* n.3.

¹³ See 52 U.S.C. § 30125(e)(1)(A); see also 11 C.F.R. § 300.71.

¹⁴ For example, if one of the non-federal committees received contributions in excess of \$1,000 or made expenditures in excess of \$1,000 and had the major purpose of influencing a federal election, then the committee would be required to register and report as a political committee. 52 U.S.C. § 30101(4); 11 C.F.R. § 100.5; *Buckley v. Valeo*, 424 U.S. 1, 79 (1976).

required to report activity related to the brochure under different provisions of the Act and Commission regulations.¹⁵

The Commission does not address the potential application of any state or local laws to Requestors' proposed activities because such matters do not fall within the Commission's jurisdiction.

This response constitutes an advisory opinion concerning the application of the Act and Commission regulations to the specific transaction or activity set forth in your request.¹⁶ The Commission emphasizes that, if there is a change in any of the facts or assumptions presented, and such facts or assumptions are material to a conclusion presented in this advisory opinion, then Requestors may not rely on that conclusion as support for their proposed activity. Any person involved in any specific transaction or activity which is indistinguishable in all its material aspects from the transaction or activity with respect to which this advisory opinion is rendered may rely on this advisory opinion.¹⁷ Please note that the analysis or conclusions in this advisory opinion may be affected by subsequent developments in the law including, but not limited to, statutes, regulations, advisory opinions, and case law. Any advisory opinions cited herein are available on the Commission's website.

On behalf of the Commission,



Sean J. Cooksey,

Chairman

¹⁵ In Advisory Opinion 2004-37 (Waters), the Commission held that, under a similar brochure comprised of only federal candidates, the Requestor should report production and distribution costs as operating expenditures and report reimbursements from federal candidates as offsets to operating expenditures. AO 2004-37 (Waters) at 5-6 (citing current 52 U.S.C. § 30104(b)(2)(I); 11 C.F.R. §§ 104.3(a)(2)(vii), (3)(ix); 11 C.F.R. §§ 104.3(b)(1)(i), (2)(i)). Further, in certain circumstances, the reimbursements may result in debt reporting obligations. *Id.* (citing current 52 U.S.C. § 30104(b)(8); 11 C.F.R. §§ 104.11(a), (b)).

¹⁶ See 52 U.S.C. § 30108.

¹⁷ See *id.* § 30108(c)(1)(B).