



FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION
Washington, DC 20463

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CERTIFIED MAIL
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ADVISORY OPINION 2010-23

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Washington, DC 20006

Dear Messrs. Baran and Burns:

We are responding to your advisory opinion request on behalf of CTIA – The Wireless Association (“CTIA”), concerning the application of the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971, as amended (“the Act”), and Commission regulations to the pledging of contributions to Federal candidates, political parties, and other political committees (collectively “political committees”) by sending text messages to Common Short Codes (“Codes”) over wireless networks. The Commission concludes that CTIA’s proposal for wireless service providers and connection aggregators to proceed under their current business practices to process contributions to political committees would not be permissible under the Act and Commission regulations.

Background

The facts presented in this advisory opinion are based on your letter received on September 10, 2010.

CTIA is an incorporated nonprofit trade association that represents the wireless communications industry. Members of CTIA include wireless service providers and their suppliers, as well as providers and manufacturers of wireless data services and products. CTIA, through its Common Short Code Administration (“Code Administration”), manages the Codes. The Codes are five- or six-digit numbers to which wireless users can send text messages to access mobile content. The Code Administration oversees the technical and operational aspects of Code functions and maintains a single database of Codes. The Code Administration leases Codes to entities, who use them for a variety of purposes, including sweepstakes, opinion polling, mobile coupons, and charitable donations. A prominent example of the use of Codes was the Red Cross’s utilization of a

Code to allow wireless users¹ to pledge ten-dollar donations to the organization's earthquake relief efforts in Haiti in 2010.

Content providers, application providers, connection aggregators, and wireless service providers work together to enable wireless subscribers' use of Codes. Content providers (such as the Red Cross) are the organizations that use Codes to disseminate content to, or collect information or pledges from, wireless users. Application providers convert the text messages received through Codes into data that can be interpreted and used by content providers. Connection aggregators link application providers to wireless service providers' networks. Wireless service providers are the companies from which wireless subscribers purchase their mobile phone service.

A wireless user who wishes to pledge a donation to an organization initiates the transaction by texting a predetermined word or phrase to a Code.² As a security precaution, the connection aggregator sends a reply text message to the wireless user, requesting confirmation of the pledge. If the wireless user confirms the pledge by sending a reply text, then the pledge is complete and the charge will appear on the next wireless bill associated with that wireless user's phone number.

CTIA indicates that it is standard business practice in the wireless industry for the wireless service provider to forward the payment to the connection aggregator about seven to ten days after the wireless service provider receives payment from the wireless subscriber. The connection aggregator accumulates all funds designated for a specific recipient from all wireless service providers over a 30-day period, and then forwards all those collected funds to the appropriate content provider(s). Both the wireless service provider and the connection aggregator deduct fees from the payment; thus, the amount ultimately received by the content provider will be smaller than the amount paid by the wireless subscriber.

It is also the wireless industry's standard business practice to impose limits on pledges made through Codes. Wireless service providers set a ten-dollar ceiling per transaction, and most³ wireless service providers impose an aggregate monthly cap of \$100 on all Code-initiated transactions per phone number. These limits reflect the concern of wireless service providers that wireless subscribers who pay one bill for multiple phone numbers (such as a family plan) or who pay for a phone number that they do not themselves use (such as a parent paying a child's wireless bill) would not pay their bills if the wireless user incurred large Code charges. Wireless providers have the

¹ The Commission distinguishes between the terms "wireless user" and "wireless subscriber." A "wireless subscriber" refers to an individual who a wireless service provider would bill. By contrast, a "wireless user" refers to a broader category of individuals, who, for example, may be on a family or group plan and therefore not directly responsible for payment to the wireless service provider.

² For example, in the aftermath of the earthquake in Haiti, individuals pledged ten-dollar donations to the Red Cross by texting "HAITI" to the Code "90999."

³ CTIA does not specify which wireless service providers impose the caps.

capability to impose these limits on a per-phone-number basis only, rather than upon the entire account, which may include several phone numbers.

The wireless service providers maintain records of their wireless subscribers' names, addresses, and the phone numbers of the wireless users associated with that account. However, wireless service providers may not know if their subscribers or users are foreign nationals. A wireless subscriber's address, as provided by the wireless subscriber, is the only information that wireless service providers may have regarding nationality.

CTIA proposes to issue Codes so that wireless users may pledge contributions to political committees through the above-described process. Only those wireless industry participants who agree to CTIA's proposal would be eligible to lease Codes from the Code Administration. The transaction fees charged to the political committees by wireless service providers and connection aggregators under CTIA's proposal would be the usual and normal fees for such transactions. When forwarding contributions to political committees, the wireless service providers and connection aggregators would follow the same business practices that they use in collecting and forwarding other funds generated through Codes. Thus, the wireless service providers would send political contributions generated by the Codes to the connection aggregators seven to ten days after receiving payment. The connection aggregators would collect political contributions from all wireless service providers over a 30-day period and then forward the contributions on to political committees. The wireless service providers and connection aggregators would not transmit the political contributions through separate merchant accounts. Also, wireless service providers and connection aggregators would not forward contributors' names and addresses to recipient political committees.

The connection aggregators could send text messages to wireless users to certify their compliance with the Act before accepting a wireless user's pledge. The messages would read:

1. Thank you for interest in contributing. Reply Y (YES) to proceed with the required legal certifications. Reply N (NO) if you do not wish to proceed.
2. I certify that I will make this contribution by paying my wireless bill with my personal, unreimbursed funds. Reply Y or N to proceed.
3. I certify that this contribution will not be made by a corporation, labor organization, or other person paying my wireless bill. Reply Y or N to proceed.
4. I certify that I am not a foreign national or government contractor. Reply Y or N to proceed.
5. I certify that my total contributions by text message to this recipient will not exceed \$50 this calendar year. Reply Y or N to proceed.

6. Contributions to political committees are not tax deductible. Please reply Y to initiate your contribution which will appear on your next wireless bill.

A wireless user would be required to respond affirmatively to each statement to make the pledge.

CTIA asserts that technological limitations and cost considerations could constrain CTIA's ability to require the wireless service providers and connection aggregators to adopt the following measures when implementing the proposed program:

1. Require through the confirming text message process that the wireless user supply his or her name and address to the connection aggregator to submit to the recipient Federal candidate, party, or political committee to monitor compliance with the Act's contribution limitations and prohibitions.
2. Include certification language along the following lines with each wireless subscriber's bill:

Contributions to political committees are not tax deductible. By proceeding with this contribution, I certify that all contributions by text message are: (1) made from personal, unreimbursed funds of a U.S. citizen, and (2) do not exceed \$50 in total to any recipient this calendar year.

3. Require wireless service providers and connection aggregators to refuse contributions from wireless subscribers with "Inc." or "Corp." or some other clearly identifiable reference in the subscriber's name indicating that the wireless subscriber is a corporation.
4. Require wireless service providers and connection aggregators to refuse contributions from wireless subscribers with foreign addresses.
5. Impose an aggregate monthly cap on contributions from each wireless subscriber to ensure that contributions do not exceed the Federal contribution limits.

Questions Presented

1. *May CTIA establish the program described above to enable the wireless service providers and connection aggregators to process contributions to political committees by Code?*
2. *Will the proposed services be provided in the ordinary course of business for the normal and usual charge?*
3. *Must CTIA require that the wireless service providers and connection aggregators forward contributions by Codes to Federal candidate, party, and political committee*

treasurers within ten or 30 days through separate merchant accounts or may they follow their ordinary business practices?

4. *Does the ten-dollar approximate per transaction limit satisfy the \$50 anonymous contribution limit? If not, must CTIA ensure that wireless service providers and connection aggregators develop a means to ensure that the contributions are not from impermissible sources and do not aggregate in excess of the \$50 limit? If so, do the proposed confirming text message certifications satisfy these obligations?*

Legal Analysis and Conclusions

1. *May CTIA establish the program described above to enable the wireless service providers and connection aggregators to process contributions to political committees by Code?*

No, CTIA may not establish the program as it is described above to enable wireless service providers and connection aggregators to process contributions to political committees by Code. As explained below, the program would not comply with the ten- and 30-day contribution forwarding requirements of 2 U.S.C. 432 and would not separate corporate funds from political contributions in a manner approved by earlier advisory opinions.

2. *Will the proposed services be provided in the ordinary course of business for the normal and usual charge?*

Yes, the proposed services will be provided in the ordinary course of business for the normal and usual charge.

The Act and Commission regulations prohibit corporations from making contributions in connection with Federal elections. 2 U.S.C. 441b(a); 11 CFR 114.2(b). A “contribution” includes “any gift, subscription, loan, advance, or deposit 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); 11 CFR 100.52(a); *see also* 2 U.S.C. 441b(b)(2); 11 CFR 114.2(b)(1). “Anything of value” includes all in-kind contributions, including the provision of any goods or services without charge or at a charge that is less than the usual and normal charge. *See* 11 CFR 100.52(d)(1). “Usual and normal charge” is defined as “the price of those goods in the market from which they ordinarily would have been purchased at the time of the contribution; and usual and normal charge for any services, other than those provided by an unpaid volunteer, means the hourly or piecework charge for the services at a commercially reasonable rate prevailing at the time the services were rendered.” *See* 11 CFR 100.52(d)(2).

A corporation does not make contributions if it provides goods or services in the ordinary course of business as a commercial vendor at the usual and normal charge. 11 CFR 114.2(f)(1). A “commercial vendor” is any person “providing goods or services

to a candidate or political committee whose usual and normal business involves the sale, rental, lease, or provision of those goods or services.” 11 CFR 116.1(c).

The Commission concludes that the proposed services would be rendered to the political committee in the ordinary course of business for the usual and normal charge. CTIA currently administers the Code Administration to enable wireless service providers and connection aggregators to process charitable donations via Code. CTIA’s proposal would establish a new program in which political committees would pay the usual and normal charge to become content providers. Further, the wireless service providers and connection aggregators will deduct fees from the contributions transmitted to political committees based⁴ on amounts charged for processing non-political funds. Therefore, the Commission concludes that CTIA’s proposed services would be rendered in the ordinary course of business for the usual and normal charge. *See* Advisory Opinions 2010-21 (ReCellular), 2010-06 (Famos), 2004-19 (DollarVote), and 2002-07 (Careau).

3. *Must CTIA require that the wireless service providers and connection aggregators forward contributions by Codes to Federal candidate, party, and political committee treasurers within ten or 30 days through separate merchant accounts or may they follow their ordinary business practices?*

Yes, CTIA must require that the wireless service providers and connection aggregators forward contributions by Code to political committee treasurers within ten or 30 days through a separate merchant account.

- a. *Forwarding Requirements of 2 U.S.C. 432(b)*

The Act and Commission regulations state that all persons who receive a contribution for an authorized political committee must forward the contribution to the political committee’s treasurer within ten days of receipt. 2 U.S.C. 432(b)(1); 11 CFR 102.8(a). The Act and Commission regulations also require that all persons who receive a contribution for a political committee that is not an authorized committee must forward the contribution to the political committee within 30 days of receipt, if the contribution is \$50 or less, and within ten days of receipt, if the contribution is in excess

⁴ CTIA notes that the fees charged to political committees would not be based entirely on the charitable donation model because that model can at times include waivers of fees.

of \$50.⁵ 2 U.S.C. 432(b)(2)(A); 11 CFR 102.8(b); *see, e.g.*, Advisory Opinion 2009-32 (Jorgensen).

Under CTIA's proposal, a contribution would be made at the time that a wireless subscriber pays a bill that includes a charge resulting from a Code-initiated pledge to contribute – not at the time a pledge is made. The wireless service provider would forward that contribution to a connection aggregator approximately seven to ten days after receiving the payment. Next, over a 30-day period, the connection aggregator would collect all contributions for a particular political committee from all wireless service providers. The connection aggregator would then forward the contributions to the recipient political committee. Thus, 40 days could lapse before a political committee received a contribution made by a wireless subscriber. Therefore, because CTIA's proposal would not require wireless service providers and connection aggregators to forward contributions to recipient political committees within the applicable statutory and regulatory timeframes, this aspect of CTIA's proposal would not comply with the Act and Commission regulations.

b. *The Use of Separate Merchant Accounts*

CTIA's proposal does not envision the segregation of political contributions from the corporate funds of either the wireless service provider or the connection aggregators.

In previous advisory opinions, the Commission has required that vendors maintain separate accounts for political contributions that are to be dispersed to candidates. The Commission has based this requirement in the Act's prohibition on corporate and labor organization contributions. *See* 2 U.S.C. 441b; 11 CFR 114.2(b); Advisory Opinions 2007-04 (AtlAtl), 2006-34 (Working Assets), 2004-19 (DollarVote), 2002-07 (Careau), and 1999-22 (Aristotle Publishing). The Supreme Court has interpreted this prohibition to require a "strict segregation" between general treasury funds and political contributions. *Pipefitters Local Union No. 562 v. United States*, 407 U.S. 385, 414 (1972).

The use of separate accounts by a corporation that forwards contributions to political committees prevents "a commingling of corporate funds and campaign funds

⁵ The circumstances in this advisory opinion are distinguishable from those in Advisory Opinions 2006-30 (ActBlue) and 2003-23 (WE LEAD). In Advisory Opinion 2006-30 (ActBlue), the Commission approved a proposal for a nonconnected political committee to collect earmarked contributions for prospective candidates before those individuals had registered their authorized committees with the Commission, on the condition that the political committee forward the contributions to the candidates' committees within ten days after the candidates' committees filing their statements of organization. Similarly, in Advisory Opinion 2003-23 (WE LEAD), the Commission approved a proposal for a nonconnected political committee that sought to raise money for the "presumptive nominee of the Democratic Party," on the condition that the political committee forward the contributions within ten days after the "presumptive nominee is identified." Here, by contrast, CTIA's proposal envisions forwarding contributions only for existing political committees. *See also* Advisory Opinions 2006-08 (Brooks), 1998-25 (Mason Tenders), and 1982-23 (Westchester Citizens for Good Government).

prohibited by [2 U.S.C.] 441b.” Advisory Opinion 1999-22 (Aristotle Publishing). While the creation of a separate account for contributions to each individual recipient political committee is no longer required, the Commission has consistently required the use of at least one separate account to segregate corporate general treasury funds from contributions. *See* Advisory Opinions 2007-04 (Atlatl), 2004-19 (DollarVote), 2002-07 (Careau), 1999-22 (Aristotle Publishing), and 1991-20 (Call Interactive).

4. *Does the ten-dollar approximate per transaction limit satisfy the \$50 anonymous contribution limit? If not, must CTIA ensure that wireless service providers and connection aggregators develop a means to ensure that the contributions are not from impermissible sources and do not aggregate in excess of the \$50 limit? If so, do the proposed confirming text message certifications satisfy these obligations?*

No, the ten-dollar approximate per transaction limit, on its own, does not satisfy the \$50 anonymous contribution limit in all circumstances. CTIA must ensure that wireless service providers and connection aggregators use a means to ensure that contributions are not from impermissible sources and, if in excess of \$50, are forwarded together with the requisite information in a timely manner. CTIA’s proposed certifications may satisfy these obligations in many circumstances. If, despite the certifications, however, a subscriber makes pledges in excess of \$50 in one billing cycle or has a corporate or foreign address, the wireless service providers would need to take additional measures.

The Act and Commission regulations require that any person who receives a contribution in excess of \$50 for a political committee must forward to the recipient political committee the name and address of the contributor and the date of the contribution. 2 U.S.C. 432(b)(1) and (b)(2); 11 CFR 102.8(a) and (b). Further, treasurers of political committees must “keep an account of (1) all contributions received by or on behalf of such political committee; (2) the name and address of any person who makes any contribution in excess of \$50, together with the date and amount of such contribution by any person; [and] the identification of any person who makes a contribution or contributions aggregating more than \$200 during a calendar year, together with the date and amount of any such contribution[.]” 2 U.S.C. 432(c)(1)-(3); *see also* 11 CFR 110.4(c). Commission regulations also require that treasurers of political committees “examin[e] all contributions received for evidence of illegality and for ascertaining whether contributions received, when aggregated with other contributions from the same contributor, exceed the [Act’s] contribution limitations” 11 CFR 103.3(b).

According to the proposal, while each of the pledged contributions would total approximately ten dollars, the contribution is not made until the wireless subscriber pays the bill. A wireless user may make repeated pledges to the same political committee within a single billing cycle, resulting in the wireless subscriber making a contribution more than \$50 when paying the monthly bill, thereby triggering the requirements of 2 U.S.C. 432(b) and (c). Moreover within the context of family and group plans, several users could each pledge to make a contribution. CTIA’s proposal does not satisfactorily

address these concerns. Further, the individual pledge limit does not provide any safeguard against the prohibitions on contributions from foreign nationals and corporations, despite the fact that the wireless service providers will know that particular wireless subscribers have foreign addresses or are corporations.

CTIA also states, however, that it could require wireless service providers and connection aggregators to use screening procedures that consist of a series of inquiries by text messages, to which a wireless user pledging a contribution must affirmatively respond. In prior advisory opinions, the Commission has approved a number of arrangements designed to ensure that corporations do not forward illegal contributions to political committees and thereby enable treasurers to comply with the Commission's regulations. *See* 11 CFR 103.3(b); Advisory Opinions 2009-32 (Jorgensen), 2007-04 (Atlatl), 2004-19 (DollarVote), and 2002-07 (Careau). For example, in Advisory Opinion 2004-19 (DollarVote), the Commission approved screening procedures that relied on contributor certifications as to the legality of the contributions, identified individual contributors, and compared residential and billing addresses to guard against corporate contributions. In Advisory Opinion 2007-04 (Atlatl), the Commission approved procedures that entailed certifications as to the legality of contributions and that forwarded contributor identification information to recipient political committees.

CTIA's alternative safeguard is similar to those approved by the Commission in prior advisory opinions. *See* Advisory Opinions 2010-21 (ReCellular), 2010-06 (Famos), 2007-04 (Atlatl), 2006-34 (Working Assets), 2004-19 (DollarVote), 2002-07 (Careau), 1995-09 (NewtWatch). Accordingly, CTIA's proposed certifications may satisfy this obligation in many, but not all, circumstances.

CTIA's proposed certification language requires the individual making the pledge to certify that he or she will be utilizing his or her own funds, not those of a corporation or labor organization, that he or she is not a foreign national, and that he or she will not make contributions via text message in excess of \$50 in the calendar year. As noted previously, however, it will be possible for a wireless subscriber to make repeated pledges to the same political committee within a single billing cycle, resulting in the wireless subscriber making a contribution more than \$50 when paying the monthly bill. Similarly, the subscriber's bill may indicate that the subscriber is a corporation or has a foreign address.

In any of these circumstances, where the certification is contradicted by evidence contained in the monthly bill, the wireless service providers would not be able to rely upon the certification and would be required to forward to the recipient committee the information required by 2 U.S.C. 432(b) and (c). As the Commission has previously explained, although "it is ultimately the responsibility of the political committee to obtain the identity of contributors and to prevent excessive and prohibited contributions," Advisory Opinion 1991-20 (Call Interactive), when presented with information raising questions as to the legality of a contribution, to ensure the committee can meet its obligations, it is incumbent upon the service provider to forward "the appropriate information." Advisory Opinion 1991-26 (Versatel).

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. *See* 2 U.S.C. 437f. 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 the requestor may not rely on that conclusion as support for its 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. *See* 2 U.S.C. 437f(c)(1)(B). 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. The cited advisory opinions are available on the Commission's website, www.fec.gov, or directly from the Commission's Advisory Opinion searchable database at <http://saos.nictusa.com/saos/searchao>.

On behalf of the Commission,

(signed)
Matthew S. Petersen
Chairman