



Women Engaged In Leadership, Education & Action In Democracy

October 8, 2003

Via Facsimile: 202-208-3333 & 202-219-3923
Re: Draft Advisory Opinion 2003-23

The Honorable Ellen L. Weintraub
Chair
Federal Election Commission
999 E Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20463

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COMMISSION
SECRETARIAT

Dear Commissioner Weintraub:

I am writing on behalf of the women of WE LEAD. For the past year and a half, we have worked to develop a new organization to help women with limited time and money become meaningfully and actively engaged, educated, and involved in our nation's political process.

Our strategy is designed to engage women, a demographic group that has historically not participated in the political giving process. While women are now earning their own money and are deciding for themselves where to spend it, the majority of political donors are males. For example, according to an article in USA Today, the nonpartisan group Democracy North Carolina released a study that showed that while 80% of the state's voters are white and 45% are male, of the people who gave to presidential elections, 96% were white and 67% were male. More studies are emerging with similar results.

What does this mean? It means that WE LEAD has developed a targeted fund raising strategy to engage the very people who the campaign finance reform movement is designed to protect. The recent restructuring of political contribution limits only serves to further donations by those who already give (white males) while doing nothing to encourage the participation of women and minorities in this country. WE LEAD's strategy fills that void.

Our message is getting out and we are hearing from people all over the country. To illustrate this point, I would like to share with you a quote from Gertrude Eldridge of Princeton, Illinois, an 83-year old widow who wrote this to us, "I've been a Democrat all of my voting life but have never found an opportunity to support the party. I can't do a great deal since I'm on a limited income, but could send something if it would be helpful." After learning about our proposal, it was the first time in eighty-three years she found a meaningful way to support the political party of her choice.

It is common knowledge that average Americans are not as politically engaged as we might wish. Many Americans pay little attention to the campaign cycle - especially the primary election cycle. For instance, in 1994 only 19.36% of eligible voters participated in the primary elections compared to 49.08% who participated in the general elections.

If these individuals are not voting, they are certainly not contributing to political candidates and most have little or no knowledge of campaign finance laws. The real truth is that many Americans do not even realize that the presidential primary election cycle is the only time they can contribute directly to the candidate of their choice. The only ones who seem to understand this system are the large donors whose influence the campaign finance reform movement seeks to curb.

By the time of the political conventions, average Americans are just beginning to pay more attention to the Presidential election. Just when they prepared to lend their support, they are precluded from donating to the candidate of their choice when that candidate accepts public funding. WE LEAD's strategy is designed to educate these potential donors and voters and increase their involvement in the political process.

WE LEAD recognized that to give women a voice, we needed a new approach -- one that would give women a reason to want to participate financially in the political process. With little knowledge of how the political fundraising system worked, we developed a strategy to unite these women around a common cause by raising funds for a particular position during a particular election cycle, rather than a particular person.

We reached this conclusion after conducting a series of listening sessions comprised of women, most who had never been politically active. In these sessions, we learned that women would rather make a sound low dollar investment and place their money in a saving account for the presumed nominee rather than risk it investing in a multi-candidate primary process.

Our strategy makes financial sense for the average American who does not have excess disposable income for political contributions. Most Americans live on carefully planned budgets and, if they want to contribute from their limited resources, they need to make their contributions immediately or risk not having the money available at a later time. Allowing them to contribute to a savings account helps them plan financially for their participation in the political process.

Over the past eighteen months, we have learned a great deal about political fundraising and the campaign finance reform movement. And, one thing is clear -- the laws that regulate political contributions are designed to insure that donors and campaigns do not exceed donor limits nor accept contributions from prohibited sources. The intent of these laws is not to limit or discourage the participation of average Americans but is instead designed to protect the system for them.

Our proposal makes sense. It is designed to increase the participation of average Americans in response to the growing concerns about the influence of large dollar donors. It can and should work within the current legal and regulatory framework. Please find a way to resolve the technicality raised by your General Counsel and allow this proposal to pass.

Sincerely,


Patricia Brennan-Gac, Treasurer