

**FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION**

Washington, D.C. 20463

May 14, 2021

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL ONLYmelias@perkinscoie.comgwilson@perkinscoie.com

Marc Erik Elias, Esq.
Graham M. Wilson, Esq.
Perkins Coie LLP
700 13th Street, NW, Suite 600
Washington, DC 20005

RE: MUR 7194

Dear Messrs. Elias and Wilson:

This is in reference to the complaint that you filed with the Federal Election Commission on November 7, 2016, concerning unknown persons who operated a website, www.votehillaryonline.com. Based on that complaint, on February 8, 2018, the Commission found that Unknown Respondent violated 52 U.S.C. § 30124(b), a provision of the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971, as amended, and instituted an investigation of this matter. However, after considering the circumstances of this matter, the Commission determined to take no further action as to Unknown Respondent, and closed the file in this matter on May 6, 2021. The Factual and Legal Analysis, which more fully explains the basis for the Commission's reason to believe finding, is enclosed.

Documents related to the case will be placed on the public record within 30 days. *See Disclosure of Certain Documents in Enforcement and Other Matters*, 81 Fed. Reg. 50,702 (Aug. 2, 2016).

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The Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971, as amended, allows a complainant to seek judicial review of the Commission's dismissal of this action. *See* 52 U.S.C. § 30109(a)(8). If you have any questions, please contact me at (202) 694-1588 or mallen@fec.gov.

Sincerely,

Lisa J. Stevenson
Acting General Counsel

Mark Allen

BY: Mark Allen
Assistant General Counsel

Enclosure
Factual and Legal Analysis

FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION
FACTUAL AND LEGAL ANALYSIS

RESPONDENT: Unknown Respondent MUR: 7194

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I. INTRODUCTION

8 The Complaint contains allegations against an unknown respondent (“Unknown
9 Respondent”) regarding an apparently fraudulent Hillary Clinton website, including an allegation
10 that Unknown Respondent violated the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971, as amended (the
11 “Act”) by fraudulently misrepresenting itself as acting for, or on behalf of, 2016 Presidential
12 candidate Hillary Clinton for the purpose of soliciting contributions. For the reasons set forth
13 below, the Commission finds reason to believe that Unknown Respondent violated 52 U.S.C.
14 § 30124(b).

15 II. FACTUAL SUMMARY

16 The Complaint, filed by the General Counsel for Hillary for America (“HFA” or the
17 “Committee”), alleges that the operator of a website, www.votehillaryonline.com, fraudulently
18 misrepresented itself as acting on behalf of HFA or Clinton for the purpose of soliciting
19 contributions.¹ According to the Complaint, the website is “a sophisticated reproduction of the
20 Committee’s actual website” that “displays campaign imagery, the Committee’s logo, and the
21 Committee’s disclaimer.”² The Complaint asserts that the website includes a fundraising
22 function, but the Committee has never authorized the operator of the website to collect funds on
23 its behalf and does not know where any funds collected by the website would have been routed.³

¹ Compl. at 1-2 (Nov. 7, 2016).

2

Id. at 2.

3 *Id.*

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1 In addition, the Complaint states that the website falsely informed supporters that they could vote
 2 for Clinton via the site.⁴

3 Publicly available information reveals that the website was registered on November 7,
 4 2016 — the day before Election Day — and is no longer active.⁵ The sworn Complaint
 5 describes the website in detail, but it did not provide screenshots, and the Commission has been
 6 unable to locate a cached version of the active site.⁶ However, the Office of General Counsel
 7 (“OGC”) located multiple online message boards on which participants purportedly discussed
 8 the website and posted images of the site as it was being developed.⁷ Those images show the use
 9 of HFA’s logo, font, color scheme, and disclaimer. The images also show that a donate button
 10 was featured on the site, though the information in the record does not disclose where that donate
 11 button led.⁸ The below screenshot from the message board displays a page from the under-
 12 construction website, including the “donate” button, which appears under the “Get Involved”
 13 heading:

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ <https://www.whois.com/whois/votehillaryonline.com> (showing a registration date of November 7, 2016). It is unclear when the website was taken down.

⁶ The site appears to be protected by robots.txt, a file that prevents systematic browsing (also known as “crawling”) and archiving of websites.

⁷ See, e.g., <https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/95596041/> (linking to <https://img.4plebs.org/boards/pol/image/1478/04/1478041459740.jpg>) (last visited July 25, 2017); <https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/96632519/> (linking to <https://img.4plebs.org/boards/pol/image/1478/52/1478523336071.jpg>) (last visited July 25, 2017).

⁸ *Id.* We note that an early draft of the site appears to have been hosted at <http://www.theabfa.com>. See <https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/96632519/> (last visited July 26, 2017) (Nov. 7, 2016, 9:15:10 comment referring to an “old URL”). In a cached version of theabfa.com on the Way Back Machine, the donate button redirects to the true HFA website. However, OGC’s review indicates that theabfa.com was the draft form of votehillaryonline.com, and we therefore do not know where the live version directed users who clicked “donate.”

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Vote for Hillary online

I'm with her

Help decide the future of our great country.



 **Get texts from Hillary**

Phone number

Email

Text me

By clicking "Text me", you agree that you would like to receive periodic text messages from Hillary for America. Msg&Data rates may apply. Text STOP to cancel or HELP for help. Terms of Service / Privacy Policy

Learn

About
 Issues
 Blog
 Speeches

Get involved

Find my state
 Volunteer
 Shop
 Jobs

Follow

Facebook
 Twitter
 YouTube
 Instagram
 Pinterest
 LinkedIn
 Medium
 Protect the vote

Paid for by Hillary for America, a grassroots campaign of over 2 million donors committed to

- 1
- 2 The Commission does not know the identity of the website's domain holder. OGC
- 3 searched whois.com, a website that discloses the registered domain holder of particular websites,

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1 and learned that www.votehillaryonline.com is registered to an entity named WhoIsGuard, Inc.
 2 (“WhoIsGuard”). WhoIsGuard is a service that conceals the identities of domain holders.⁹

3 **III. LEGAL ANALYSIS**

4 The Act provides that no person shall fraudulently misrepresent themselves as speaking,
 5 writing, or otherwise acting for, or on behalf of, any candidate or agent thereof for the purpose of
 6 soliciting contributions or donations.¹⁰ Further, the Act provides that no person shall willfully
 7 and knowingly participate in or conspire to participate in any plan or scheme to engage in such
 8 behavior.¹¹ Although the Act requires that the violator have the intent to deceive, it does not
 9 require proof of the common law fraud elements of justifiable reliance and damages.¹² “Even
 10 absent an express misrepresentation, a representation is fraudulent if it was reasonably calculated
 11 to deceive persons of ordinary prudence and comprehension.”¹³

12

⁹ See <https://www.whois.com/whois/votehillaryonline.com>. The WhoIsGuard service is provided by the corporation Namecheap. See <https://www.namecheap.com/security/whoisguard.aspx>. Likewise, the draft version of the site, www.theabfa.com, is protected by PrivacyProtect, LLC, a similar privacy protection service. See <https://www.whois.com/whois/theabfa.com>.

Based on message boards discussing the website, it appears the site’s creators may be foreign nationals. In one posting, a self-identified creator of the site requested help in securing a domain, stating “no one of our team comes from US [sic].” <https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/96625952/> (last visited July 26, 2017). The poster appears to have an Italian internet proxy (“IP”) address, though IPs can be masked and manipulated. It is unclear whether a United States citizen or foreign national ultimately paid for the registration of the website.

¹⁰ 52 U.S.C. § 30124(b)(1); *see also* 11 C.F.R. § 110.16(b)(1).

¹¹ 52 U.S.C. § 30124(b)(2); *see also* 11 C.F.R. § 110.16(b)(2).

¹² See *FEC v. Novacek*, 739 F. Supp. 2d 957, 961 (N.D. Tex. 2010) (finding that defendants knowingly and willfully violated 2 U.S.C. § 441h(b) (now 52 U.S.C. § 30124(b)); Disclaimers, Fraudulent Solicitation, Civil Penalties, and Personal Use of Campaign Funds, 67 Fed. Reg. 76,962, 76,969 (Dec. 13, 2002) (“Explanation and Justification”) (citing *Neder v. United States*, 527 U.S. 1, 24-25 (1999)) (distinguishing fraud in federal campaign finance abuses from common law tort action on the basis of Congress intending to penalize schemes as well as actions taken to defraud and the damaging effect of misrepresentation); Factual & Legal Analysis at 4, MUR 5472 (Jody Novacek).

¹³ *Novacek*, 739 F. Supp. 2d at 961.

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1 The information in the record indicates that Unknown Respondent fraudulently
2 misrepresented itself as soliciting contributions for, or on behalf of, HFA and Clinton. The
3 website appears to have mimicked HFA's website, used the Committee's official logo, and,
4 perhaps most deceptively, included a disclaimer stating that it was paid for by the Committee.
5 The website's name itself, "votehillaryonline," is misleading. Together, these facts suggest
6 Unknown Respondent fraudulently misrepresented itself as acting for, or on behalf of, Clinton
7 and HFA, and did so while soliciting contributions. Accordingly, the Commission finds that
8 Unknown Respondent violated 52 U.S.C. § 30124(b).¹⁴

¹⁴ Additionally, publicly available information on message boards indicates that some of the persons involved in creating the website may have been foreign nationals, suggesting a potential violation of the Act's prohibition on expenditures by foreign nationals. *See* 52 U.S.C. § 30121(a)(1)(C); 11 C.F.R. § 110.20(f). However, that information does not provide a sufficient basis to conclude whether the website was financed by foreign nationals. The Commission will take appropriate action if it discovers that the website was financed by foreign nationals.