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December 7, 2015

The Hon. Fred Upton
Chairman
House Energy & Commerce Committee
2125 Rayburn HOB
Washington, DC 20515

The Hon. Frank Pallone
Ranking Member
House Energy & Commerce Committee
2322 Rayburn HOB
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Upton and Ranking Member Pallone:

The Campaign Legal Center strongly urges the House Energy and Commerce Committee to move expeditiously to report out H.R. 4179, legislation recently introduced by Representative Ben Ray Lujan (D-NM). The measure directs the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to promulgate regulations requiring material in the online public inspection file of television stations to be made available in a machine-readable format.

With the 2016 elections less than a year away, there are a record-breaking number of political advertisements running on the publicly-owned airwaves. Although establishing an online FCC database for the statutorily required public files kept by television broadcasters was an important step forward, the FCC has not finished its work because it has not required stations to make the information included in the public inspection file available in a searchable, sortable, downloadable format. Currently, broadcasters are simply uploading in portable document format (PDF) whatever paper documents would have been placed in the public file. Every station keeps its records somewhat differently. As a result, the current database is difficult to navigate and does not permit the aggregation of spending by a particular campaign or outside group.

H.R. 4179 will make the data base more user friendly and far more informative to the American public.

When the FCC first required that public files be placed online, it found that “certain information in the public file would be of much greater benefit to the public if made available in a structured and database-friendly format that can be aggregated, manipulated, and more easily analyzed; *this continues to be our ultimate goal.*” In the Matter of Standardized and Enhanced Disclosure Requirements for Television Broadcast

Licensee Public Interest Obligations, 27 FCC Rcd. 4535, 4575 (2012) (emphasis added). The FCC's own *Information Needs of Communities* Report observed that "[i]t matters greatly how [government data is] organized. It needs to be put out in standardized, machine-readable, structured formats that make it easy for programmers to create new applications." *Information Needs of Communities* (Jul. 2011), at 350-51, available at http://transition.fcc.gov/osp/inc-report/The_Information_Needs_of_Communities.pdf.

The Committee should move expeditiously to direct the Commission to adopt the use of a standardized, machine-readable format for submitting political file data, which is essential to making the political file data more meaningful and useful. The Commission should also use this data to create a database that facilitates analysis, including, among other things, an easy-to-use graphic interface as well as an application programming interface (API) to permit searching and downloading of the documents and metadata *en masse*. The specifics of this proposal can be found in Comments of the Public Interest, Public Airwaves Coalition (PIPAC) et al., MM Docket 00-168 at 16-23 (Aug. 26, 2013).

Moving the FCC public file to a database format is long overdue. The current PDF-based system is in fact more burdensome for broadcasters as stations keep most of their programming information in electronic format. A paper-based system is simply outdated.

We urge you to report out this common-sense measure quickly without weakening amendments.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "M McGehee". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letter of the first name being a large, stylized 'M'.

Meredith McGehee
Policy Director