



June 4, 2015

The Honorable Johnny Isakson
Chairman
Senate Select Committee on Ethics
220 Hart
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Barbara Boxer
Vice Chairman
Senate Select Committee on Ethics
220 Hart
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Isakson and Ranking Member Boxer:

We are writing to urge the Senate Select Committee on Ethics to expeditiously undertake a more aggressive effort to educate and train Senators and their staffs regarding the applicable rules for use of any Senate resources during a campaign. We believe this action is warranted for a number of reasons. First, an unusually high number of Senators are running for President, and therefore, the campaign season has started much earlier. In addition, Senators and their staffs may not have had the experience of maintaining a congressional office while running for national office.

We are aware that the Committee has provided to Senate offices a “Quick Reference” sheet on “Campaign Guidance” that provides important information about the Senate rules and applicable statutes. We are concerned, however, that simply having this handy guide available is not sufficient to ensure that Senators and their staffs are appropriately educated about the “do’s and don’ts” of campaigning while also controlling and using Senate resources daily. We have already seen an example where a Senator running for President made the mistake of using the broadcast feed from the Senate floor in his commercials, contrary to explicit Senate rules. Once the violation was noticed, he took the ad down.

But these kinds of mistakes are likely to continue without a more aggressive training outreach from the Ethics Committee.

Last year, we urged the Committee to initiate a robust outreach effort to educate Senate staff regarding permissible campaign activities. As we stated in that letter, “Mistakes often happen in this area due to an excessive focus on a Senator’s reelection, insufficient understanding of rules and ineffective oversight. The Senate Ethics Committee can help preempt violations or scandals by providing educational programs and advisory opinions, which will in turn raise the general awareness and education level of Senate staff in this area.” We reiterate this year that such training will help Senators and staff avoid potential violations of Senate ethics rules and statutes and serve to protect the integrity of the institution.

Experience has shown that our concerns were well-placed. Under the current system, a Senator and each member of his or her staff usually attends one training session upon arriving and then goes the rest of their time in the Senate with no further refresher course. Continuing this course of inaction is an invitation to further violations and fails to send the clear message that compliance with ethics rules and standards should be a priority for everyone connected with Congress.

Sincerely,

Meredith McGehee
Policy Director
Campaign Legal Center

Lisa Gilbert
Director, Congress Watch
Public Citizen

Craig Holman
Government Affairs Lobbyist
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