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Election 2004

Legality of political gift in doubt

A secretive group's late ads backing President Bush and Sen. Mel Martinez were paid for in part by a foreign donor.

By LUCY MORGAN, Times Tallahassee Bureau Chief
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TALLAHASSEE - The secretive religious group that spent more than \$500,000 buying ads to support the candidacies of President Bush and U.S. Sen. Mel Martinez may have violated federal election law by accepting a foreign contribution.

A spokesman for the Federal Elections Commission says federal law prohibits foreign nationals from contributing money to buy ads in a federal election within 60 days of the election.

The Thanksgiving 2004 Committee was formed Oct. 25 by a group of men who belong to the Exclusive Brethren, a religious group based in England and Australia. Many of the individual contributions came from people and businesses in the United States, but \$377,000 of the more than \$600,000 collected by the committee was contributed by a Brethren member in London, who is a British citizen.

The Brethren bought newspaper ads supporting the president in a number of U.S. papers and purchased an ad in the St. Petersburg Times supporting Martinez, but their religion prohibits voting or reading newspapers.

Spokesmen for Bush and Martinez say they were unaware of the group or the last-minute advertising campaign.

Members of the Brethren would not explain why they were buying ads to influence an election when none of their members could vote.

The group was established in the early 1800s in Ireland. Most of its

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members are in England and Australia.

George Smaragdis, spokesman for the FEC, said any money contributed by a foreign national and used to purchase advertising so close to an election violates a 1966 law designed to limit foreign intervention in U.S. elections.

The FEC could force the committee to return the contribution and impose fines or other penalties if it found a violation occurred. All complaints and enforcement actions taken by the FEC are confidential until they are concluded. Smaragdis would not confirm whether the FEC was investigating the matter.

[Last modified January 19, 2005, 00:32:23]

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