



Maryland News

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Md. may regulate campaign use of social media

By: KATHLEEN MILLER
Associated Press
05/13/10 7:14 PM EDT

ANNAPOLIS, MD. — Political candidates in Maryland may be required to clearly identify their campaign when using social media outlets like Facebook and Twitter.

Jared DeMarinis, candidacy and campaign finance director for Maryland's Board of Elections, said he is drafting regulations now to require candidates clearly label their campaign's social media accounts, as they do with other forms of communication. DeMarinis said such rules will help protect the public from misinformation and candidates from people who may try to tarnish their reputation by establishing false accounts in their name.



"Everyone is now using sites like Facebook and Twitter to get campaign messages out and talk about issues," DeMarinis said. "Maryland campaign law was written before these kinds of media were available and we're trying to develop regulations to help guide and bring clarity."

The Federal Election Commission has ruled that campaign regulations do not apply to most Internet activity, except for financial issues like paid political advertising on someone else's website. Several other states, however, are also considering whether they need new rules governing the use of social media in campaigns.

In California, the state's Fair Political Practices Commission formed a task force last fall to examine how campaigns intersect with social media and to determine whether additional regulations are necessary. Some officials raised questions there about whether gubernatorial candidates had to report Twitter Inc.'s recommendation of their Twitter feeds as in-kind campaign donations. In Wisconsin, the state's Government Accountability Board ordered staff last year to draft guidelines for when the public needs to know who is paying for an online ad or Web site.

Maryland state Sen. Don Munson, R-Washington County, said he learned how easily social media can be abused when a person close to one of his political rivals turned a Facebook page created for one purpose into a page for people looking to remove Munson from office.

The senator said several of his Republican colleagues who had joined the first group unwittingly wound up members of "Fans of Ousting Liberal Senator Don Munson," when the page's creator changed the group's name. He said his colleagues were the ones to inform him of the incident and stressed they had no idea how their names had been misused.

"These kind of things could go on for a long time unless somebody tells you about it," Munson said. "It is scary, for candidates at least, because a candidate's reputation is everything."

Experts said there are pluses and minuses to the growing use of social media by political campaigns. Adam Hoffman, a Salisbury University assistant professor of political science and co-director of the school's Institute for Public Affairs and Civic Engagement, credited social media with increasing younger people's involvement in the electoral process.

He adds though, that "to some extent it is a wild west out there on the Internet" given how easy it is for people to spread rumors about candidates, "sullyng the whole process."

Elections official DeMarinis said it will be fairly easy to devise rules for how campaigns should label a home page on websites like Facebook and MySpace. He's still wrestling with how to note campaign affiliation on Twitter, however, where there is a 140-character limit for messages.

He hopes to present his proposals at a June meeting, where four of the five members of Maryland's elections board would need to endorse any new regulations.

Michael Cain, director of the Center for the Study of Democracy at St. Mary's College of Maryland, praised DeMarinis' initiative.

"You can see this coming down the road," Cain said. "You're in a close election, you have a colleague make a Facebook page, find a bunch of friends and put out some disinformation. I think it's a good idea to find a way to let people know what is sanctioned."

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