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Bush officials broke electioneering law, federal agency reports

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At least seven Cabinet secretaries to President [George W. Bush](#) took [politically motivated trips](#) at taxpayer expense while aides falsely claimed they were traveling on official business, the independent Office of Special Counsel said Monday night in concluding a three-year probe.

In a report on allegations that first surfaced before Bush left office, the agency condemned what it depicted as [widespread violations](#) of a law restricting political activities by federal workers and illegal use of federal funds to engage in electioneering.

The abuses mostly occurred in 2005 and 2006, when Bush's advisers were anxious about the looming midterm electoral losses that would hand control of the House of Representatives to the Democrats.

According to the report, the White House improperly orchestrated the use of assets throughout the government to help key congressional allies as the voting drew near, including arranging more than a hundred ostensibly official appearances by top appointees in battleground states such as Pennsylvania, New Mexico, Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana and Connecticut.

This federally funded travel was organized, approved and closely tracked by Bush's political office, the Office of Special Counsel found, describing the activity as leading to the illegal diversion of federal funds and workers' time.

At one point in 2006, it disclosed, operatives employed by the Republican National Committee moved into White House quarters where they worked in tandem with the political-office staff to coordinate the campaign.

While White House officials may legally pursue close political contact with outsiders, the report said, "the systematic, [partisan](#) political activity described in this report, including strategically supplying targeted candidates with administration support to secure electoral gains, goes far beyond a need for political information [meant] to effectively advise the president."

"It is, in fact, the type of electioneering proscribed by the Hatch Act," the agency added, referring to a 1939 law meant to limit federal workers' explicit efforts to influence the electoral process.

The Office of the Special Counsel, which wrote the report, is the principal body charged with enforcing the act; it works independently, although its director is appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate.

The report said the Hatch Act's proscription on using official time or federal funds for political activities was repeatedly broken when the White House organized dozens of election-related [pep talks](#) during normal work hours at 20 agencies between 2001 and 2007, including many at which

attendance by all top political appointees was considered mandatory.

The trips that it said were inappropriately funded by taxpayers included 2006 visits by Veterans Administration Secretary James Nicholson to the districts of then-Rep. Deborah Pryce (R-Ohio) and House candidate Doug Roulstone (R-Wash.); a trip by acting Transportation Secretary Maria Cino to the district of then-Rep. Christopher Shays (R-Conn.); and a visit by Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne to the district of then-Rep. Rick Renzi (R-Ariz.).

Occasionally, some of the estimated 100,000 documents reviewed by the counsel's office described the need for these trips to be reimbursed by political funds, but no evidence could be found that they were.

The report also noted that Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman used Defense Department and Federal Aviation Administration aircraft to travel to "six events with Republican [incumbents](#)" listed by the White House political office as top priorities, at a total cost of \$30,795.

It said that, while not enough information was available to conclude "whether these events should have been classified as political and reimbursement should have been sought," a separate probe of them has been started, "due to the seriousness of using government aircraft to attend political events."

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