

# Campaign stunt launches a corporate 'candidate' for Congress

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Murray Hill might be the perfect candidate for this political moment: young, bold, media-savvy, a Washington outsider eager to reshape the way things are done in the nation's capital. And if these are cynical times, well, then, it's safe to say Murray Hill is by far the most cynical.

That's because this little upstart is, in fact, a start-up. Murray Hill is actually Murray Hill Inc., a small, five-year-old Silver Spring public relations company that is seeking office to prove a point (and perhaps get a little attention).

After the Supreme Court declared that corporations have the same rights as individuals when it comes to funding political campaigns, the self-described progressive firm took what it considers the next logical step: declaring for office.

"Until now, corporate interests had to rely on campaign contributions and influence-peddling to achieve their goals in Washington," the candidate, who was unavailable for an interview, said in a statement. "But thanks to an enlightened Supreme Court, now we can eliminate the middle-man and run for office ourselves."

William Klein, a "hired gun" who has been enlisted as Murray Hill's campaign manager, said the firm appears to be the first "corporate person" to run for office and is promising a spirited campaign that "puts people second, or even third."

The corporate candidate already has its own [Web site](#), a [Facebook page](#) with 2,600 fans and an [online ad](#) on YouTube that has drawn more than 172,000 hits.

The ad makes a particularly passionate case for why it's necessary to have more direct corporate representation in Congress.

In a soothing voice, a narrator bemoans that "as much as corporate interests gave to politicians, we could never be absolutely sure they would do our bidding." The ad includes images of gleaming office towers and disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff and promises Murray Hill will bring "enlightened self-interest and corporate accounting" to Congress.

It concludes with a rousing call to action: "Vote for Murray Hill Incorporated for Congress -- for the best democracy money can buy."

The firm, whose clients include labor unions and environmentalists, is seeking to enter the Republican primary for the 8th District seat held by Rep. Chris Van Hollen (D).

The firm "wanted to run as a Republican because we feel the Republican Party is more receptive to our basic message that corporations are people, too," Klein said, adding that his client has no particular beef with Van Hollen.

## Manifold mockery

Van Hollen welcomes the competition. "The majority on the Court has made a mockery of our campaign finance laws, and Murray Hill is just mocking the mockers," said Doug Thornell, a senior adviser to Van Hollen.

The court's ruling in *Citizens United v. Federal Elections Commission* drew a torrent of criticism, including from President Obama, who said in his State of the Union address that it would "open the floodgates to special interests, including foreign corporations, to spend without limit in our elections."

### **An obstacle course**

Murray Hill does face a couple of tiny problems in its effort to get elected to Congress.

For starters, candidates must officially register to vote as a Republican to run in a Republican primary in Maryland. Late this week, the Montgomery County Board of Elections wrote to Murray Hill, informing the firm that its voter registration application had been rejected.

It seems the corporation does not meet the "minimum requirements" for voter registration, which include being a U.S. citizen and at least 18, according to Kevin Karpinski, a lawyer for the county elections board.

Just another case of The Man sticking it to Corporate America.

Eric Hensal, the firm's president, questioned whether the age requirement should really be applicable. "It's not as if, when a corporation turns 21, it can buy beer," he said.

The firm is weighing legal action, but the ruling still leaves open another potential path to victory, said Klein, a longtime political and communications consultant whose clients have included presidential aspirant Paul Simon (D-Ill.) and Montgomery County Council member Duchy Trachtenberg (D-At Large).

In Maryland, independent candidates are not required to be registered voters. They can qualify for the fall ballot by collecting enough signatures from voters in their district -- about 4,500, in this case.

But the same pesky age issue is posed by the U.S. Constitution.

It requires candidates for Congress to be at least 25 -- a concern that is likely to be flagged at the point the corporation attempts to file for office, which it has yet to do, said Jared DeMarinis, director of the candidacy and campaign finance division of the Maryland State Board of Elections.

DeMarinis said the issue of whether Murray Hill is enough of a person to run for office sounds "like one of those great law school debate questions." But it's not one that he thinks will be answered in the firm's favor.

The firm has prepared to deal with other "antiquated" parts of election law through the use of a "designated human" capable of signing paperwork and showing up at debates, for example. By vote of its shareholders, Murray Hill selected Hensal, the company's president, for that.

### **Ideas rolling in**

Whether or not a corporation ultimately replaces Van Hollen in Congress, Murray Hill's interest has sparked other speculation among the political chattering class in Maryland.

Why not have an accounting firm run for comptroller, the state's chief tax collector? Why not a law firm for attorney general? The winning firm could arrive in office with a full cadre of associates and save taxpayers money.

It remains to be seen whether the attention generated by Murray Hill's bid will be good for its bottom line.

"This really wasn't part of a marketing plan for ourselves," Hensal said. "It's an opportunity to see this court opinion play out to its logical conclusion."

In the meantime, Murray Hill is looking to franchise -- and found its first taker: Computer Umbrella of Sterling. The company is planning to run in Virginia's 10th Congressional District.

A Murray Hill tool kit available for other corporate aspirants includes a model news release, talking points and templates for other campaign materials.

"If your campaign conforms to Murray Hill Inc.'s exacting standards," the company says, "your materials may use our logo and official graphics, which tell the world you are an affiliate of the leader in corporate civil rights."

Stephen A. Horvath, a prominent Montgomery banker, said he thinks he is probably better represented in Congress by a live human than a corporation but added: "I guess with a corporation, should someone go on vacation, like many of our current members of Congress, you'd have fill-ins to take their place."