

By Claire Snyder-Hall

Imagine if our politicians openly campaigned for the favor of corporations. Instead of knocking on doors, kissing babies, and posing for photos at local diners, they might gather with executives in conference rooms.

Imagine if a vote of McDonald's and Walmart had the same weight as your vote?

Instead of heading to Iowa and New Hampshire to kick off their campaigns, candidates would likely head to Delaware.

More than 60 percent of Fortune 500 companies and 93 percent of all US-based initial public offerings have chosen to register in Delaware, thanks to our remarkably lenient incorporation regulations and our corporate-friendly court system.

With 1.8 million businesses registered in the First State, we are home to more businesses than people. Though there are certainly economic benefits to this, there are also many drawbacks. One such drawback is that corporations in Delaware have an immense amount of pull on our politics. But a bill recently proposed in the legislature would serve to increase the political weight of corporations – and make the dystopian situation described above a reality.

HB 121, introduced by state Representative Daniel Short, would ratify changes to the Seaford city charter that would allow artificial entities like corporations, limited liability companies (LLCs), and trusts

Should McDonald's, Verizon and Auto Zone have the right to vote? No



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to vote in municipal elections.

Seaford is a small town with a population of about 8,000. According to the *Delaware News Journal*, if this legislation were to pass, 234 artificial entities headquartered in Seaford would be given a vote in the next election. To put that in context: during Seaford's last election, only 340 votes were cast by real, human voters.

Common Cause Delaware is strongly opposed to this legislation. If passed, this initiative would dilute the votes of human voters, dramatically change the way candidates campaign for office, and give businesses the power to directly elect business-friendly City

Council members.

Though proponents of this bill have tried to frame it as an innocuous way to give business owners more power, in reality, this legislation would give corporations and LLCs the power to dominate Seaford's elections.

This bill violates the principle of one person, one vote by giving non-persons – artificial entities – the right to vote and also by allowing non-resident business owners to vote twice – once in Seaford and a second time where they actually live.

To be clear, this bill would not allow Seaford residents who also own businesses in Seaford to vote twice, but it would grant that extraordinary privilege to non-resident business owners.

Non-resident voting makes no sense. Snowbirds are not permitted to vote once in Delaware and a second time in Florida. College students are not permitted to vote once where they attend university and a second time in their hometown. Why should business owners be allowed to vote twice?

The bill raises a second issue as well. That is, while Seaford is trying to give voting rights to artificial entities, it is im-

portant to note that the city already allows non-resident natural persons who own property to vote there, a policy also followed in multiple Delaware towns and cities, including the coastal communities of Rehoboth Beach, Dewey, Bethany Beach, South Bethany, Henlopen Acres, and Fenwick Island.

Consequently, corporate lobbyists and consultants who work full-time in Washington, D.C. and can afford second homes in Seaford or at the beach already get an additional vote.

Non-resident voting by natural persons or artificial entities is wrong because owning property should not give anyone extra power at the ballot box. Indeed, in the US we severed the connection between property ownership and voting rights in the early nineteenth century.

I view this attempt as part of the nationwide wave of voter suppression. That is to say, non-resident voting accomplishes the same goal as voter suppression in a different way.

Instead of erecting barriers to prevent residents from voting, non-resident voting laws cancel out the votes of resi-

dents by allowing outsiders to dilute the vote.

The Seaford bill would take voter dilution one step further by allowing corporations and other artificial entities to dominate, not just with their big money but also with their newly acquired power to vote.

And that could provide a blueprint for a national wave of increased corporate dominance.

Unfortunately, the Seaford corporate voting bill is not the first attempt to dilute the voices of human voters in Delaware. In 2018, Rehoboth Beach residents rose up to stop a proposal pushed by the mayor and his cronies to allow LLCs to vote in regular elections.

While the Seaford mayor and his supporters won the battle to change their city's charter, the bill still needs the approval of the Delaware House and Senate to become law.

Through a Delaware Freedom of Information Act request, the *Delaware News Journal* obtained a list of corporations that would be eligible to vote in Seaford, if this bill were to pass.

Some of the potential voters would include: Auto Zone, McDonalds Corp #007, and Verizon.

The ultimate question surrounding this legislation is simple: Should we add Auto Zone, McDonalds Corp #007, and Verizon to our voters rolls?

My answer is no. **CHC**

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In this issue

1. Corporate Crime Cases Hit New Low Under Biden
1. OSHA Enforcement Suspended
1. Biden Schumer Manchin Dirty Debt Deal
2. Should McDonald's Verizon and AutoZone have the Right to Vote? No
3. Letters to the Editor
5. Swiss Billionaire Convicted of Manslaughter
9. Congress Needs to Protect Government Whistleblowers
10. Interview with Asa Winstanley
13. How the USA Became a Warfare State
14. Oliver Stone Film Ignores Nuclear Reality
16. Your Father's Nuclear Power Plant
17. A College for Members of Congress
18. Regulation Can Create Jobs
19. The Iraq War 20 Years Later
20. Interview with Cindy Sheehan
22. Interview with Matthew Hoh

24. Interview with Dahr Jamail
26. Cornel West Takes on the Corporate Duopoly
28. Howie Hawkins: Questions for Cornel West
29. View from the Stroller
30. An Open Letter to Laurence Tribe
31. Democratic Sheepdog Caucus
32. Interview with Gretchen Morganson
34. The Incommunicados
35. The Corporate Sabotage of America's Future
36. Military Industrial Congressional Complex on a Spending Spree
37. Toxic Inaction: No Movement in Congress on Precautionary Principle
38. Members of Congress Are Home for August. Summon Them to Town Hall Meetings on Corporate Power
39. Problem Child
40. The Last Word: NPIC Out of Control