



DEMOCRACY REFORM TASK FORCE WEEKLY NEWS ROUND UP

January 11, 2019

NATIONAL NEWS

[Democrats' First Bill in New Congress Would Actually Drain the Swamp](#)

New York Magazine

Democrats had initially unveiled H.R. 1 in November. At the time, the party called the bill an anti-corruption measure and its public financing provisions received little attention, as the Intercept notes. With public opinion largely united on the need to root out corruption in Washington, H.R. 1 is the most tangible effort from either major party to address the issue. Donald Trump ran on draining the swamp, but he perceives his class interests with clarity; Trump, a self-proclaimed mogul, has stocked his administration with other moguls and moneyed lobbyists. H.R. 1 isn't just about Trump, or the well-established discrepancy between his campaign rhetoric and his actions as president. For Democrats, the bill is also an exercise in identity formation, a way to preview a corruption message that goes beyond superficial anti-Trumpism by incorporating a real critique of power in Washington. Public financing for elections would make candidates less reliant on major donors and corporate money, a problem that did not originate with Trump's fateful campaign announcement.

[House Dems Unveil Bill Targeting Trump Tax Returns and Transparency](#)

The Washington Post

House Democrats are set to pursue legislation that squarely targets President Trump by requiring presidential candidates to disclose 10 years of tax returns, mandating more transparency for presidential inaugural and transition committees and tightening White House ethics standards. Those provisions are only a small part of a broad reform bill — titled the “For the People Act” — that encompasses campaign finance, election integrity and security, congressional ethics and more. But they are clear signals that Democrats intend to take an aggressive approach to Trump and his administration. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and other Democrats unveiled an outline of the legislation Friday in the Capitol, which will move through several House committees

over the coming weeks and is tentatively set for floor consideration early this year.... Rep. John Sarbanes (D-Md.), who had led the drafting of the bill, focused on other aspects of the bill in a recent briefing — including measures that would expand voter registration, improve access to voting options and tighten election security, as well as improve disclosure of political donors and reduce their outsized influence on the political process. “I have a feeling the 2020 election is going to have a historic turnout for voting, and if we’re not ready for that we could end up with a train wreck,” he said. “This is a set of prescriptions to make sure every election that comes down the pike is handled in a respectful way.”

[Inside the Dems’ New Plan to Fight Dark Money and Voter Suppression](#)

Rolling Stone

This is obviously not the reality in which Americans currently live. But it is the world envisioned in H.R. 1, also known as the For the People Act, the first bill put forward by House Democrats after retaking the majority and returning Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) to the speakership. On Friday morning, a group of Democrats, led by Rep. John Sarbanes (D-MD), Pelosi as well as other senior members, unveiled new details about what’s included in the For the People Act. It’s arguably the most ambitious piece of legislation put forward by the Democratic Party in the modern era when it comes to restoring the health of American democracy. “We heard loud and clear from the American people that they feel left out and locked out too often from their own democracy,” Sarbanes said at a press conference on Friday. Democratic candidates for office ran on a pledge to curb the flow of big money and the influence of special interests, and H.R. 1, Sarbanes continued, “is the delivering on that promise back to the American people and telling them, in return for you giving us the gavel, we are going to do everything we can, everything single day, to give you your democracy back.”

[Dems Begin Pushing Bill Demanding Tax Returns, New Ethics Rules](#)

Newsweek

While some Democrats are already suggesting impeachment of President Donald Trump, such as freshman Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib, leadership and veteran members of the party continue to try and keep the focus on House Resolution 1, the party’s signature bill that seeks to obtain the president’s tax returns and establish new ethics rules. The resolution, officially known as “The For the People Act,” has been touted by House Democrats for months. Pledging it will “restore our Democracy,” the sweeping reform bill would amend campaign finance, voting and ethics laws. In addition, it would require presidents and vice presidents, including candidates for the offices, to release 10 years of their income taxes, something Trump has long refused to do. As promised, it was one of the party’s first major bills introduced Friday after retaking control of the chamber for the first time in nine years.... One of the Democrats heading H.R. 1, Representative John

Sarbanes of Maryland, said Friday it will "set the table" for the type of legislative action that's to come from Democrats.... "Once the public sees it, then they'll want to pass the whole thing, not just pieces," Sarbanes told reporters last month, adding there would be a "political consequence for those who stand in its way."

[House Democrats Have a Plan to Actually Drain the Swamp](#)

Think Progress

House Democrats gained at least 40 seats in the November 2018 midterm elections, in part based on their promise to fight the culture of corruption that festered under the GOP's control. As they usher in the 116th Congress on Thursday, the new House Majority plans to hit the ground running with two packages to actually drain the swamp and take on the for-profit Trump administration. But with Republicans still controlling the Senate, one of those packages is likely going to run into the massive anti-reform roadblock that is Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY). As promised, incoming Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) and her new majority plan to kick off the new Congress with a major sweeping anti-corruption bill — designated as H.R. 1 — and a series of House rule changes (H. Res. 6) that will address weaknesses in the House's own operating policies.... The broader package of reforms in H.R. 1 was announced by Pelosi and Rep. John Sarbanes (D-MD) late last year. Its provisions would end undisclosed "dark money" in political elections; tighten lobbyist registration loopholes; reform campaign-finance law to incentivize small political donations; and enact voting-rights reforms including a ban on partisan gerrymandering and a restoration of the Voting Rights Act.

[House Dems Target Trump Tax Returns In Lead-Off Ethics Package](#)

FOX News

The reform package, H.R. 1, the "For the People Act," also aims to "end the dominance of big money" and "reduce the role of money" in politics, by requiring political organizations to disclose their big-money contributors and donors, introduces a multiple-matching system for small political donations to "break special interests'," and tightens rules of super PACs. The bill also bans foreign contributions in campaigns and requires PACs and organizations to disclose the identities of their donors who contribute more than \$10,000. "We heard loud and clear the American people feel left out and want us to clean the culture of corruption, and they want it to be easy, not hard, to register to vote in America," Democracy Reform Task Force Chairman Rep. John Sarbanes, D-Md., said at a press conference Friday.

[House Dems Seek SEC Rule on Political Giving Disclosure](#)

Bloomberg Law

The Securities and Exchange Commission could require publicly traded companies to disclose their political spending under one of the first bills the new House Democratic majority introduced Jan. 4. Language lifting a ban that's prevented the SEC from writing a political donation disclosure rule is part of a broader Democratic bill (H.R. 1) that would overhaul campaign finance disclosures, elections security, and ethics rules. Rep. John Sarbanes (D-Md.), who heads the House Democrats' Democracy Reform Task Force, spearheaded the bill.

[H.R. 1 and Redistricting Commissions](#)

Election Law Blog

H.R. 1—the omnibus electoral reform bill recently unveiled in the House—has received surprisingly little attention on this blog. Sure, it's not going to be passed by the Senate or signed by President Trump. But it probably is going to be passed by the House, thus marking the first time that proposals like automatic voter registration, redistricting commissions, and multiple-match public financing have been endorsed by a majority of that body. If Democrats win unified control of Washington in 2020, it's also likely that some or all of H.R. 1 will become law. If that happens, it would be a development of earthshaking significance, at least as important as the enactment of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 or the Federal Election Campaign Act in 1974.

[Democrats Start Investigative Gears, but Slowly](#)

The New York Times

Democrats, transitioning into the House majority, have quietly sent dozens of letters in recent weeks seeking documents and testimony from President Trump's businesses, his campaign and his administration, setting the table for investigations that could reach the center of his presidency. Clear targets have emerged in the process, and some others appear to have fallen away, at least for now. Family separation and detention policies at the border have jumped to the forefront. So has the acting attorney general's oversight of the special counsel, Robert S. Mueller III. But Democrats, after slamming House Republicans for their inadequate inquiry, do not plan to reopen a full-scale Russian interference investigation. They have also chosen to hold off on an immediate request for Mr. Trump's tax returns. For eager liberals coming off two years of Republican oversight paralysis, the next few weeks may feel something like a game of hurry up and wait. Arranging witnesses and wrangling sensitive government documents take time, and most House committees have yet to be populated with lawmakers, not to mention much of the legion of lawyers who will do a lot of the work of investigations. The Intelligence Committee did not technically have a chairman until last week. "Those people who are expecting some kind of

Hollywood movie here are going to be disappointed because it is going be very orderly,” said Representative Jim Himes, Democrat of Connecticut and a senior member of the Intelligence Committee.

[Shutdown Spares Federal Park Rangers at Site in Trump Hotel](#)

The Associated Press

Smithsonian museums are closed. There are no federal staffers to answer tourists’ questions at the Lincoln Memorial. And across the United States, national parks are cluttered with trash. Yet despite the federal government shutdown, a historic clock tower at the Trump International Hotel remained open Friday for its handful of visitors, staffed by green-clad National Park Service rangers. “We’re open!” one National Park Service ranger declared around lunchtime, pushing an elevator button for a lone visitor entering the site through a side entrance to ride to the top of the 315-foot-high, nearly 120-year-old clock tower. The Trump administration appears to have gone out of its way to keep the attraction in the federally owned building that houses the Trump hotel open and staffed with National Park Service rangers, even as other federal agencies shut all but the most essential services. Amanda Osborn, a spokeswoman for the General Services Administration, which owns the building and leases it to the Trump Organization, said in an email that the shutdown exemption for the comparatively little-known clock tower was “unrelated to the facility’s tenant” — the Trump business.

[DNC Loses Appeal on Republican Election Tactics](#)

POLITICO

A consent decree that limited Republican Party’s use of controversial poll-watching and ballot security efforts for more than three decades appears consigned to the scrap heap of history after a federal appeals court rebuffed a move by Democrats that could have led to restoration of the long-running court order. The 3rd Circuit Court of Appeals turned down the Democratic National Committee’s attempt to reopen discovery aimed at proving that the Republican National Committee violated the order in 2016 as then-candidate Donald Trump pressed publicly for a crackdown on what he contended was likely election fraud. After the election, Trump famously claimed — without evidence — that millions of illegal immigrants cast ballots in the presidential contest. Despite Trump’s public calls for his supporters to keep a close eye on certain neighborhoods, the three-judge panel unanimously ruled Monday that Democrats had not made a sufficient showing that the depositions they wanted to take were likely to show that the RNC actually responded to Trump’s entreaties.

**Related Story: [Trump Was Handed a Chance to Supercharge Voter Suppression in 2020.](#)*

IN THE STATES

[Cummings, Sarbanes Talk Election Reform at Town Hall Meeting](#)

The Baltimore Sun

With a Democratic-led House of Representatives in place, voting rights and other anti-corruption measures are very much on Alan Cohen's mind. That explains why he trekked down to the War Memorial building at 10:30 a.m. Saturday morning to hear what two congressmen from the newly installed majority had to say.... Tagged the "For The People Act," the bill, pushed by many Democrats during last year's election campaigns, offers changes that would affect voting, political money, redistricting and ethics. And there to talk about it was the congressman who introduced it, John Sarbanes, along with Elijah Cummings, the new chair of the House Committee on Oversight and Reform. The meeting was organized by Indivisible Baltimore, a volunteer group "dedicated to protecting progressive values during the Trump administration," according to forms left on seats that audience members were asked to fill out. Members of Indivisible Baltimore and Indivisible Howard County stood outside the building, holding printed blue-and-white signs that read, "Whose House? Our House."

[House Democrats Prepare to Probe Disputed North Carolina Election](#)

POLITICO

House Democrats are preparing to launch their own investigations into the disputed congressional election in North Carolina, where Republican Mark Harris' campaign is facing fraud allegations and the state elections board had refused to certify the results. Harris' campaign has sued in state court to be seated in Congress, despite an ongoing investigation by the elections board that suffered a setback when the board was dissolved at the end of 2018. Harris leads Democrat Dan McCready by 905 votes in the unofficial vote count, but voters and election workers have filed numerous affidavits detailing irregularities during the election, including reports that McCrae Dowless, a subcontractor for Harris' campaign consultants, ran an operation that collected and marked voters' absentee ballots. The House Democratic investigations could pave the way for a new election in the district, even if the court orders the board of elections to certify Harris as the winner instead of the board ordering a re-vote itself. The House Administration Committee, now controlled by Democrats, has the authority to call for another election after investigating the 2018 results.



[NC Election Fraud Probed Long Before 2018 Race](#)

The Associated Press

Long before accusations of absentee ballot fraud in a small North Carolina county cast doubt on the results of a heated 2018 congressional race, a state elections investigator spent weeks probing whether the man at the center of the current scandal was among a group buying votes. That 2010 investigation was one of at least a half dozen instances over the last nine years that prosecutors and elections officials received complaints of serious elections irregularities in Bladen County, a rural locale of 35,000 people that has long had a statewide reputation for political chicanery by both Republicans and Democrats. The state's ongoing criminal investigation into 2018 voting irregularities has focused on Leslie McCrae Dowless Jr., a local political operative and convicted felon. Marshall Tutor, who retired in March after 15 years as an investigator for the N.C. Board of Elections, told The Associated Press his office first fielded accusations nearly a decade ago that Dowless, now 62, was among a group giving voters cash to fill out ballots the way he directed.

[Commission Recommends Machine-Marked Ballots for Georgia](#)

ABC News (Online)

After Georgia's 2018 elections focused stinging criticism on the state's outdated election system, a study commission voted Thursday to recommend the use of machines that record votes and print a record. Members of the panel tasked with considering a potential replacement chose that option over hand-marked paper ballots favored by cybersecurity experts. The Secure, Accessible and Fair Elections, or SAFE, Commission voted 13-3 for a draft of a report to be sent to lawmakers, who are expected to decide on criteria for a new system during the legislative session that begins Monday. The commission includes lawmakers, political party representatives, voters and election officials. Georgia's paperless touchscreen voting machines, in use since 2002, have been widely criticized. Cybersecurity experts have warned they are unreliable and vulnerable to hacking. There's also no way to do an effective audit or confirm votes are recorded correctly because there's no paper trail.

KEY OPINION

[This Is What Democracy Looks Like](#)

The Washington Post (Op-Ed by E.J. Dionne Jr.)

“This is what democracy looks like.” It was the chant heard again and again at the women’s marches the day after Donald Trump was inaugurated and echoed later in mobilizations on behalf of gun safety and the Affordable Care Act, in defense of immigrants and refugees, and in support of democracy itself. Those determined gatherings were, indeed, part of what democracy looks like.... But democracy also looks like what we saw on the floor of the House of Representatives last Thursday. Through use of the ballot, fortified by exceptional feats of organization and mobilization, voters changed the face of government in our country — in both a literal and figurative sense.... It is thus appropriate that the new majority gave the hallowed designation H.R. 1 to the bill they presented Friday with the purpose of expanding democracy while pushing back against corruption. The headline aspects of the legislation took aim at Trump-era sleaze, including a requirement that presidential candidates release their tax returns and tightening of White House ethics rules. But the guts of the bill are all about making our system more democratic: automatic voter registration along with limits on voter purges and other methods that states use to block access to the ballot box, especially for minorities and the young. It would also ban contributions from corporations controlled by foreign entities.

[How to Fix America’s Broken Political System](#)

POLITICO (Op-Ed by Norm Eisen and Fred Wertheimer)

Much attention has focused on H.R. 1, the comprehensive package of democracy reforms introduced on Thursday by Representative John Sarbanes (D-Md.) on behalf of the new Democratic House majority. The unprecedented legislation is perhaps the most important domestic initiative of the new Congress. But it also has the capacity to begin fixing what has been broken in our foreign relations, reassuring our allies that America is on the way back to restoring our democracy, and with it our global leadership. Since 2016, the United States’ friends around the world have been faced with a dual shock: Russia’s multi-pronged attack on our elections that year and the ascension of President Donald Trump, who has criticized our longtime partners while embracing authoritarians like Russian President Vladimir Putin—despite his assault on our democracy.... H.R. 1 reforms our broken political system but it also addresses the concerns of Americans and allies alike who are anxious that our elections are vulnerable to future foreign attacks. The bill incorporates election security reforms that are long overdue. It would establish standards for election vendors, provide significant assistance to states to improve and protect their election systems, and bolster federal efforts to assess and respond to threats to election systems.

[H.R. 1 Would Help Restore the Promise of Our Democracy](#)

The Capital Gazette (Op-Ed by John Sarbanes)

Throughout my time in Congress, I have enjoyed sitting down on a regular basis with the Capital Gazette editorial board to discuss a wide variety of issues that matter to residents of Annapolis and Anne Arundel County. One consistent theme is that our democratic institutions have lost their footing and are increasingly unresponsive to the needs of average Americans, that Washington has been captured by special interests and lawmaking has become an insider's game. People are desperate to reclaim their democracy. So it was gratifying on the first day of the 116th Congress to lead the new Democratic majority in unveiling and introducing H.R. 1, the For the People Act — a bold and transformative reform bill that will return power to the people by making it easier, not harder, to vote; breaking the grip of big money on our politics; and strengthening ethics laws so that the public officials serve the public, not themselves.... Democratic candidates across the country ran on these reforms during the last election. We promised to clean up the culture of corruption in Washington and return power to the American people. Now, we are ready to keep that promise by passing H.R. 1 and returning to a government of, by and for the people.

[The Lobbyists Blocking the Doorway](#)

The New York Times (Op-Ed by Thomas B. Edsall)

Speaker Nancy Pelosi and the idealistic class of 64 Democratic House freshmen are armed with a reform agenda. This includes H.R. 1, a 571-page bill that addresses voting rights, corruption, gerrymandering and campaign finance reform as well as the creation of a Select Committee on the Climate Crisis — a first step toward a “Green New Deal.” Proponents of this ambitious project face a determined adversary, however — the top ranks of the interest group establishment, skilled in co-opting liberal members of Congress and converting initiatives to square with the interests of corporate America. The upper stratum of the Washington lobbying community often exercises de facto veto power over the legislative process, dominating congressional policymaking, funneling campaign money to both parties and offering lucrative employment to retiring and defeated members of the House and Senate.

[The Democrats Are Leading Off with a Bill to 'Restore Democracy'](#)

The Hill (Op-Ed)

Democrats have already told us, however, what their first priority is. H.R. 1, the first piece of legislation introduced in the 116th Congress, includes election and government reforms and campaign finance fixes such a requirement that super PACs disclose their donors and the provision of matching funds for small donations to candidates; limitations on gerrymandering; automatic voter registration; a requirement that presidential candidates make their tax returns public; a prohibition on the use of federal funds by members of congress settling sexual



harassment lawsuits; and much more. The Democrats are following Republicans' lead in presenting H.R. 1, not just as a bill that happened to be introduced early, but as a defining piece of legislation (in the last Congress, H.R. 1 was the tax cut bill). Incoming Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Representative John Sarbanes penned an op-ed in the "Washington Post" about the bill on Nov. 25, describing it as a bill to "restore democracy."

[Keeping Our Promise to the Valley, Starting Day 1](#)

The Modesto Bee (Op-Ed by Josh Harder)

Last year, I promised that if elected to Congress, I'd put the needs of the Central Valley first. It's why I committed to refusing all corporate PAC (political action committee) campaign donations. It's also why I helped lead a charge to make anti-corruption legislation a top priority in the new Congress. I am proud that one of the first bills introduced in the new Congress will be the sweeping anti-corruption legislation we pushed for. There are a lot of issues we need to tackle in the new Congress, but year after year the corrupting influence of big money in politics has been the single biggest obstacle to getting things done. For instance, just about everyone agrees we need to address the absurd costs of prescription drugs in America. But in the last decade, pharmaceutical companies have spent \$79 million in political donations ... and prices for their drugs keep rising. Most Americans agree we can do more to advance cleaner, renewable energy sources and create jobs in those industries. But lobbyists for oil and coal companies write big checks to politicians ... and nothing gets done. These troubling examples show how business gets done in Washington. It doesn't have to be this way.

[Why Is Congress So Dumb?](#)

The Washington Post

Americans who bemoan a broken Congress rightly focus on ethical questions and electoral partisanship. But the tech hearings demonstrated that our greatest deficiency may be knowledge, not cooperation. Our founts of independent information have been cut off, our investigatory muscles atrophied, our committees stripped of their ability to develop policy, our small staffs overwhelmed by the army of lobbyists who roam Washington. Congress is increasingly unable to comprehend a world growing more socially, economically and technologically multifaceted — and we did this to ourselves.... The creation in the House rules of a Select Committee for the Modernization of Congress in this new session is a terrific beginning — and a signal that Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and Rules Committee Chairman Jim McGovern (D-Mass.) understand the importance of these issues. Providing capital and staff to the institution should be a major priority in the 116th Congress. The budgets we approve fund 445 executive departments, agencies, commissions and other federal bodies. But for every \$3,000 the United States spends per American on government programs, we allocate only \$6 to oversee them. After decades of disinvesting in itself, Congress has become captured by outside

interests and partisans. Lawmakers should be guided by independent scholars, researchers and policy specialists. We must recognize our difficulties in comprehending an impossibly complex world. Undoing the mindless destruction of 1994 will take a lot of effort, but with investment, we can make Congress work again.

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