



## DEMOCRACY REFORM TASK FORCE WEEKLY NEWS ROUND UP

January 18, 2019

### NATIONAL NEWS

#### [House Dems' Colossal Election Reform Bill Could Save Democracy](#)

##### SLATE

The Democrats' first order of business as they took control of the 116th Congress was introducing H.R. 1, the colossal "For the People Act." Among the provisions affecting voting and voting rights are those requiring online voter registration, automatic voter registration, and same-day registration for voting in federal elections; a requirement to use independent redistricting commissions to draw congressional districts in each state; limitations on voter purges; an end to felon disenfranchisement for federal elections; protection against intimidation and false information surrounding elections; improved access to voting by persons with disabilities; a set of improved cybersecurity standards around voting and voting systems, including a requirement that all voting systems produce a paper trail for auditing and checking results; and a ban on a state's chief election officer engaging in political activities connected to federal offices...The provisions in H.R. 1 related to campaign finance would expand disclosure rules to cover ads on the internet, a step that is necessary to better track attempted foreign influence over elections; establish a small-donor multiple match public financing system for Congress and a similar fix to the now-moribund presidential public financing system; create a pilot program for the use of campaign finance vouchers in congressional elections, a move I have long supported; enact a new set of rules to make sure that super PACs do not coordinate with candidates; and reconfigure the Federal Election Commission, with an odd number of commissioners and a requirement that at least one of the commissioners not be a Democrat or Republican. The ethics provisions would require the Supreme Court to be bound by an ethics code, strengthen conflict of interest laws, and require presidential and vice presidential candidates to release 10 years of tax returns.



## [A Bill for All the People](#)

### **Times Union**

It's quite likely that the first bill submitted by House Democrats to mark their reclaimed majority will never become law, not in its entirety at least. But it's nonetheless a good blueprint for building a better government of the people. Sponsored by John Sarbanes, D-Maryland, and co-sponsored by Speaker Nancy Pelosi, HR 1 calls for sweeping reforms in the areas of voting, money in politics, redistricting and ethics. It's a broad attempt to address many of the problems we've seen across the country in both national and state elections.... Of course, few politicians would admit they're for voter suppression and big money. They'll couch the arguments against HR 1 instead in lofty rhetoric — that giving politicians lots of money is an expression of free speech, and that would-be voters should jump through hoops in order to guard against all that voter fraud that no one can seem to find, not even a commission appointed by Mr. Trump to try to prove he didn't really lose the popular vote. But let's have this debate nonetheless. Let Americans hear and see whether their representatives try to feed them tortured arguments against fair elections and ethical government, or side with the people — not just the people they think will vote for them, but the people this government is supposed to be of, by, and for.

## [Care About Science? Demand a Better Democracy](#)

### **Scientific American**

Think science should inform policy? Then I'm here to tell you why you should care about democracy reform. We don't get science-based policies unless our political system allows for it. And we don't get policies that protect people unless decision makers have our interests in mind. Right now, that political system is broken. Voters have been disenfranchised. Moneyed interests have drowned out science and evidence in policy debates. And much of this is happening behind closed doors. But we can fix it. One of the first bills introduced by the new House of Representatives this January tackles this crucial issue. House Resolution 1 (H.R. 1) is a bill focused on addressing the corruption of this administration and restoring several important pillars of our democratic system: voting rights, money in politics, and ethics. We need everyone on board who cares about evidence in policy decisions.

## [McConnell Calls House Democrats' Anti-Corruption Bill a "Power Grab"](#)

### **Vox**

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell took square aim at the sweeping anti-corruption and voting rights bill House Democrats are pushing as their first of the year. McConnell wrote a scathing op-ed in the Washington Post on Thursday, characterizing the bill as a Democratic attempt to “grow the federal government’s power over Americans’ political speech and elections.” ...“I’m not surprised that he would be attacking the bill and all of its various pieces because I think it

presents a threat to the kind of system he's built," said Rep. John Sarbanes (D-MD), who is spearheading the legislation. "The fact that McConnell would pen something like that validates that we're doing the right thing." ...The Senate leader had already said he had no plans to take up anything like the Democrats' bill in the Senate. But this op-ed outlines the conservative thinking about the reforms Democrats are proposing. "I think what jumped out at me was he thought he had to go through the whole menu," Sarbanes said. "The fact he's attacking the whole package and every piece of it shows he has absolutely no interest in any kind of reform ... this is not the guy you would want waxing eloquent on the pages of any newspaper about how much he cares about democracy in America."

## [Mitch McConnell's Bad Bet on Democracy Reform](#)

### **Medium**

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell's extraordinary jeremiad assailing the democracy reform bill known as H.R. 1 illustrates both the unbridgeable chasm that now divides Republicans and Democrats, and the deep cynicism and voter disconnect that define today's GOP. McConnell's impassioned take-down of House Democrats' "For the People Act" in a recent Washington Post op-ed sheds light on why he's been content to let the government shutdown drag on so long. The moment the impasse ends, House Democrats will approve their bill to expand voting rights, encourage low-dollar campaign contributions, end gerrymandering, shed light on secret money and tighten up lobbying and ethics rules.... It's as if Republicans, having placed winning at all costs above all else for so long, cannot conceive that Democrats might advance H.R. 1 for any reason other than partisan self-interest. In making the case for Democrats' bad motives, however, McConnell comes across as both remarkably out of touch with public sentiment, and as incapable of debating the topic honestly.

## [McConnell: Democrats' Anti-Corruption Bill Aims to 'Swing Elections'](#)

### **The Huffington Post**

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) accused House Democrats of trying to "swing elections" with a major piece of legislation designed to clean up voting and campaign finance and strengthen government ethics. McConnell described the so-called For the People Act as a "power grab" and a "naked attempt to change the rules of American politics to benefit one party" in a Thursday op-ed for The Washington Post. The top Republican criticized Democrats for introducing the bill, also known as HR1, while the longest-ever partial government shutdown continues.... Rep. John Sarbanes (D-Md.), who introduced the bill earlier this month, tweeted Thursday night, "If [McConnell] is against it, then #HR1 must be a pretty good idea."

## [Small-Donor Campaign Finance Proposal Is a Great Deal for Taxpayers](#)

### **Vox**

As we begin to debate the House Democrats' landmark "For the People Act" (HR 1), here's one pushback we might expect to see: The small-donor public matching system in the bill costs too much public money. It's a standard argument that campaign finance reform opponents often make. But it only focuses only on the costs. It doesn't take into account the benefits. A publicly funded campaign finance system will save taxpayers far more money than it costs them. It will pay for itself in more responsive and smarter public policy. As a simple comparison, let's put the current Congress's HR 1 up against that of the last Congress — Republicans' massive tax bill. By most estimates, the tax bill's 10-year cost will be \$1.5 trillion (that's trillion with a T). Some estimates put it closer to the \$2 trillion mark, or even \$2.3 trillion. And why so expensive? Well, the bill gave massive benefits to corporate executives and the very rich. As Republican Rep. Chris Collins said about the tax reform bill, "My donors are basically saying, 'Get it done or don't ever call me again.'" By one estimate, tax lobbyists donated \$9.7 million in 2017. The tax bill was full of big and small wins for corporate lobbyists. This raises an obvious question: If Republican lawmakers hadn't been so eager to please their big donors, would they have put together a different bill? Perhaps if they had been raising money from small donors in their districts, instead of raising money from lobbyists at Washington fundraisers and listening to very rich people complain about taxes being too high, their tax bill might actually have given most of the benefits to the middle class. Who knows?

## [Congress Ignored Its Election Duties for Years. That Ends Now.](#)

### **Roll Call**

Things could go wrong if Democrats let politics drown out policy. Each specific election reform issue in H.R. 1 deserves public debate both by Congress and by the state legislatures across the country. Unfortunately, the package of voting reforms was introduced within hours of members taking the oath, with no Republican co-sponsors. Let's be honest: The Senate is unlikely to take up this legislation in its entirety — which means its value comes mostly as a conversation-starter. This is a chance to begin a national discussion on election administration. It isn't an easy one. Democrats have traditionally focused on expanding access to the voting experience. Republicans have focused on the integrity of the system. They are moving closer together, and efforts such as the bipartisan 2013-2014 Presidential Commission on Election Administration show us that compromise is within reach. The best thing to do now is lower the temperature. Lowering the temperature doesn't mean sacrificing a robust debate on how to register voters, where and when to cast ballots, and who and how to count the ballots will ensure both access and integrity. House Democrats can do both. States should not wait a moment longer to implement the reforms that improve the voting experience in the ways that Americans demand. In the meantime, Congress should start talking.

## [Trump's Inaugural Fund Spent Lavishly at His D.C. Hotel, New Docs Show](#)

### **ABC News**

President Donald Trump's inaugural committee spent more than \$1.5 million at the Trump International Hotel in Washington ahead of his 2017 swearing-in, according to internal documents reviewed by ABC News.... Compared to past inaugurations, the festivities surrounding Trump's swearing-in were modest in scale – the non-profit group established to oversee the celebration hosted only three major events. But the amount of money involved was record-breaking – with more than \$107 million raised and \$104 million spent, double the amounts of President Barack Obama's first inaugural.... "These inaugural committees if there's not good transparency and disclosure, can turn into slush funds," said Rep. John Sarbanes, a Maryland Democrat, who has served on the House Oversight Committee. "That's why you need to have requirements that they disclose what the spending is, where it's coming from, put some limits on the kind of spending that's appropriate, so that it's really going towards inaugural needs, and not other purposes."

## [At Trump's Inauguration, \\$10,000 for Makeup and Lots of Room Service](#)

### **The New York Times**

Private donors put up \$107 million to usher Donald J. Trump into office in style two years ago, and it is now clear just how enthusiastically his inaugural committee went to town with it. There was \$10,000 for makeup for 20 aides at an evening inaugural event. There was another \$30,000 in per diem payments to dozens of contract staff members, in addition to their fully covered hotel rooms, room service orders, plane tickets and taxi rides, including some to drop off laundry. The bill from the Trump International Hotel was more than \$1.5 million. And there was a documentary, overseen by a close friend of Melania Trump's, that was ultimately abandoned. The details of the expenditures, gleaned from interviews and from documents reviewed by The New York Times and not previously made public, show that the committee spent heavily on nearly every aspect of the events surrounding the inauguration.

## [Trump Sold \\$35 Million of Real Estate In 2018](#)

### **Forbes**

Donald Trump sold an estimated \$35 million worth of real estate while serving in the White House last year, according to a Forbes analysis of local property records and federal filings. Although the president delegated day-to-day management of his assets to his sons Eric and Don Jr. upon taking office, he maintained ownership of his business, which continued to liquidate properties. More than half of that \$35 million came from a single deal, in which Trump and business partners offloaded a federally subsidized housing complex in Brooklyn for about \$900 million. The president held a 4% stake in the property, according to his personal financial disclosure report. After subtracting roughly \$370 million in debt, Forbes estimates Trump walked away with \$20

million or so before taxes. The deal required approval from officials inside the Department of Housing & Urban Development, which rolls up to Donald Trump.

## [Agency Ignored Constitutional Questions About Trump Hotel Lease](#)

### **The New York Times**

The federal agency that had leased a prime property in Washington to the Trump Organization failed to grapple fully after the 2016 election with the politically fraught question of whether Donald J. Trump's victory left the deal in violation of the Constitution, according to an inspector general's report released on Wednesday. The inspector general for the agency, the General Services Administration, found that its lawyers agreed that Mr. Trump's election raised constitutional issues about the Trump Organization's lease of the building on Pennsylvania Avenue, which was redeveloped as the Trump International Hotel. The lease was signed in 2013 and the hotel opened two weeks before the 2016 election. But rather than confront head-on after Election Day what to do about the issue — or seek the advice of the Justice Department — the agency ignored it, the report said. Essentially, the General Services Administration decided to “punt,” the report said, quoting a senior agency lawyer, effectively clearing the way for Mr. Trump's business to continue operating in the heart of the capital. The inspector general's report suggested that the intersection of Mr. Trump's business with his role as president might violate the Constitution's restrictions on government-bestowed benefits or “emoluments” to federal officials, besides their salaries.

## [T-Mobile Execs Stay at Trump Hotel After Announcing Merger](#)

### **The Washington Post**

Last April, telecom giant T-Mobile announced a megadeal: a \$26 billion merger with rival Sprint, which would more than double T-Mobile's value and give it a huge new chunk of the cellphone market. But for T-Mobile, one hurdle remained: Its deal needed approval from the Trump administration. The next day, in Washington, staffers at the Trump International Hotel were handed a list of incoming “VIP Arrivals.” That day's list included nine of T-Mobile's top executives — including its chief operating officer, chief technology officer, chief strategy officer and chief financial officer, and its outspoken celebrity chief executive, John Legere. The executives had scheduled stays of up to three days. But it was not their last visit. Instead, T-Mobile executives have returned to President Trump's hotel repeatedly since then, according to eyewitnesses and hotel documents obtained by The Washington Post.

## [Judge Orders Trump Administration to Remove 2020 Census Question](#)

### **NPR (Online)**

A federal judge in New York has ruled against the Trump administration's decision to add a citizenship question to the 2020 census. U.S. District Judge Jesse Furman ordered the administration to stop its plans to include the controversial question on forms for the upcoming national head count "without curing the legal defects" the judge identified in his 277-page opinion released on Tuesday. The question asks, "Is this person a citizen of the United States?" All U.S. households have not been asked such a question on the census since 1950, although it has been asked of a sample of households for past head counts and for the Census Bureau's American Community Survey. Furman found that the decision by Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross to add the citizenship question to the 2020 census was "unlawful" because of "a veritable smorgasbord of classic, clear-cut" violations of the Administrative Procedure Act, including cherry-picking evidence to support his choice. Ross oversees the Census Bureau.

## [Mortgage Industry Gets Shutdown Relief After Lobbying Campaign](#)

### **The Washington Post**

After an intense lobbying campaign by the mortgage industry, the Treasury Department this week restarted a program that had been sidelined by the partial government shutdown, allowing hundreds of Internal Revenue Service clerks to collect paychecks as they process forms vital to the lending industry. The hasty intervention to restore the IRS's income verification service by drawing on revenue from fees — even as 800,000 federal employees across the country are going without their salaries — has intensified questions about the Trump administration's unorthodox efforts to bring certain government functions back online to contain the shutdown's impacts. Critics, including many former IRS officials, described the move as an act of favoritism to ease the burden on a powerful industry.

## [A Dilemma for Democratic Hopefuls: Run To, or Away from, Big Donors?](#)

### **The Los Angeles Times**

The well-heeled liberals who donate big money to Democrats — creating an outsized role for themselves in choosing which party leaders ascend to stardom — are used to candidates swarming them with requests for cash. This election they face a different dilemma: Candidates worry they are a liability. Mega-checks, once the lifeblood of a candidacy, are now a source of angst for the politicians best positioned to reel them in. Super PACs have become a super headache. The allure of dark money is up against the antipathy of party activists. Sen. Elizabeth Warren's call to "lock arms" and reject all but small donations — an appeal that would have been dismissed in previous cycles as opportunistic and unrealistic — has successfully boxed in some of her top-tier rivals who may need whale-sized donors to compete. Democrats have talked and

postured and pontificated about the ills of money in politics for years, especially since the Supreme Court's 2010 Citizens United decision opened the way for a huge influx of corporate and big-money donors. The current cycle is shaping up to be the election where Democratic candidates will be expected to walk the walk.

## [Democratic Presidential Hopefuls Cast Off PACs](#)

### **POLITICO (Morning Score)**

KEEP YOUR MONEY — One thing that every Democratic presidential candidate can agree on? They're not taking money from corporate PACs. Every candidate who has either formally declared or launched an exploratory committee — Sens. Elizabeth Warren and Kirsten Gillibrand, Rep. Tulsi Gabbard, former Rep. John Delaney and former HUD Secretary Julián Castro — have all disavowed corporate PAC money, something that is quickly becoming a litmus test in the Democratic Party. (Gabbard said she wouldn't take PAC money in 2017, and her campaign did not respond to questions about her presidential campaign.)... And some candidates have taken it a step further. Gillibrand, Warren and Castro have all said they'd disavow the efforts of any super PAC that tries to support them. And while they can't stop super PACs from weighing in, rejecting the groups is the next step for many Democrats seeking to cast themselves as not beholden to big-monied interests.

## [Women Are Fueling Democrats' 2020 Hopes — with Money](#)

### **NBC News**

In 2018, women contributed to, and campaigned for, Democratic candidates like never before, fueling a record gender gap between the parties and sweeping a surge of first-time female candidates into office. If Democratic women remain this engaged and financially active ahead of the 2020 presidential election — and all signs suggest they will — Republicans face a stark disadvantage as they attempt to re-elect Trump and retain control of the U.S. Senate. Like millions of other left-leaning donors, [citizen Cindy] Garlock's campaign contributions passed through ActBlue, a fundraising platform designed to allow grassroots donors to efficiently contribute cash to Democratic candidates and liberal organizations. The Center for Public Integrity analyzed data provided by ActBlue and interviewed dozens of female Democratic donors and fundraisers who give political committees money at varying levels. The analysis found women are driving changes in how Democratic candidates raise money while providing key funding and support to new liberal organizations rallying the left.

\* \* \*

