



# DEMOCRACY REFORM TASK FORCE WEEKLY NEWS ROUND UP

February 8, 2019

## NATIONAL NEWS

### [Anti-Corruption, Campaign Finance Bills Preview Likely 2020 Campaign](#)

#### Roll Call

Even as House Democrats have made a political overhaul a top priority, numerous lawmakers, including freshman members, have filed their own campaign finance and anti-corruption bills, a sign the topic will dominate into the 2020 campaigns. Rep. Jason Crow, a Colorado Democrat who unseated Republican Mike Coffman last November, introduced his first bill last week: a measure that could lead to disclosures of donors to 501(c)(4) “social welfare” tax-exempt groups that play in politics.... Along those same lines, another freshman, New York Democrat Max Rose, has also introduced legislation aimed at the K Street lobbying corridor.... Rep. John Sarbanes, the Maryland Democrat who is the chief sponsor of House Democrats’ overhaul, said the stand-alone bills, some of which are also included in the HR 1 package, allow individual members to highlight specific proposals as well as offer some pieces a chance for bipartisan support. “They know the kind of things that resonate and wanted to take a leadership role in showcasing these individual components,” Sarbanes said. “I think it’s all part of a strategy of bringing attention to these important democracy reforms.” The freshman Democrats, in particular, Sarbanes said, made these issues a centerpiece of their campaigns. “They’ve got a very clear directive from their constituents,” he said. “I credit the freshman class, the new members, with keeping the focus on this reform package and bringing the energy to bear so that Washington doesn’t slide back into business as usual.”

### [Cummings Pledges to 'Fight Until the Death' for Voting Rights](#)

#### The Baltimore Sun

U.S. Rep. Elijah Cummings delivered a fiery speech Wednesday in which he shared a promise his 92-year-old mother asked from him on her death bed a year ago. Cummings, who chairs the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, delivered the heated speech during the committee’s hearing on H.R.1 — a bill on voting rights, campaign finance and ethics rules. The legislation, called the “For the People Act,” was introduced by U.S. Rep. John Sarbanes, a



Maryland Democrat and a senior member of the committee. “He has compiled one of the boldest reform packages to be considered in the history of this body,” Cummings said of Sarbanes at the beginning of the hearing. “This sweeping legislation will clean up corruption in government, fight secret money in politics and make it easier for American citizens across this great country to vote...” After about an hour and half of testimony on the bill, Cummings brought up a North Carolina court case concerning voting districts, which federal judges found to be discriminatory toward black residents.... Cummings called the North Carolina voting districts “chilling” and recalled how his mother, a sharecropper, had witnessed Americans harmed and beaten while seeking the right to vote, he said. “Her last words were ‘Do not let them take our votes away from us,’ ” he said, punctuating each word.

## [Republicans Rewrote Voting Laws for 8 Years. Dems Say It’s Their Turn.](#)

### **The New York Times**

In the years after Republicans swept state and congressional elections in 2010, legislatures in 25 states — all but a handful of them dominated by the party — enacted laws that made it harder to register and vote, from imposing ID requirements and curbing voter registration drives to rolling back early voting periods. In November, Democrats reclaimed some of the ground they lost eight years ago. And now the rules for casting a ballot are moving fast in the opposite direction....In an op-ed in The Washington Post last week, Mr. McConnell branded [H.R. 1] “the Democrat Politician Protection Act.” “From the First Amendment to your ballot box,” he wrote, “Democrats want to rewrite the rules to favor themselves and their friends.” That does not faze Democrats, who are betting that Republicans are on the wrong side of an issue that has finally gained traction with the public. Even if they lose to Republicans in Congress, Democrats say, they will win with voters. Should Republicans block the bill, “it becomes a marker by which we start measuring McConnell, the Senate and anybody else who stands in the way,” Representative John Sarbanes, a Maryland Democrat who is the House bill’s principal sponsor, said in an interview. “I think it’ll be increasingly difficult for him to resist this as a narrative.”

## [Battle Erupts Over Bill to Make Election Day a Holiday and Bolster Ethics](#)

### **Yahoo News**

At a Wednesday hearing of the House Committee on Oversight and Reform, a sharply partisan tone marked debate over the Democrats’ first new bill of the 116th Congress, a proposal that would make Election Day a federal holiday and institute new ethics rules.... Named HR 1 because of its legislative pole position, the For the People Act of 2019 was introduced by Rep. John Sarbanes, D-Md. The bill would expand access to voting, in part by instituting automatic voter registration and making Election Day a federal holiday. It would also put stronger ethical constraints on the executive branch, in part by making it more difficult for people to move through the “revolving door” between public and private sector work, and by strengthening the Office of Government Ethics. The bill also contains a section on campaign finance disclosure.

## [House GOP Warns that H.R. 1 “Resembles Russian Govt Policy”](#)

### **The Intercept**

Republicans on the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform denounced a major new initiative by Democrats to clean up elections and expand voter participation as a power grab that will corrupt the political process and infringe on the rights of free speech and association.... The bill, sponsored by Maryland Rep. John Sarbanes, is the first serious attempt in decades to revamp the model for public financing of presidential campaigns and establish a national program to publicly finance congressional campaigns. It also expands rights and protections for voters; bans senior federal officials from getting private sector perks after they leave office; prohibits senior federal employees from working on issues in which they have financial interests; and strengthens the call for Trump to divest his business holdings and place them in an independent, blind trust....Tennessee Rep. Clay Higgins conceded that the bill might have some worthwhile measures, but said he wanted to see it broken down into smaller components.... He also said the bill “resembles Russian government policy.”

## [Stacey Abrams, in Democrats’ Response, Calls for Ballot Fairness](#)

### **The New York Times**

Stacey Abrams who narrowly lost her race in November to be Georgia’s governor delivered the Democrats’ official response to President Trump’s State of the Union address on Tuesday night by outlining the party’s vision for lower health care costs and a more inclusive immigration policy, and pressing her case that access to the voting booth should be easier, not harder. “Let’s be clear: Voter suppression is real,” Ms. Abrams said. “From making it harder to register and stay on the rolls to moving and closing polling places to rejecting lawful ballots, we can no longer ignore these threats to democracy.” Ms. Abrams’s loss in November dashed hopes that she would become the first African-American female governor, and the way she lost rankled her and her supporters, amid charges of voter suppression and ballot rigging. Her emphasis on voting rights Tuesday night fit the theme she struck when she conceded the race to her Republican rival, Brian Kemp, who supervised the election as Georgia’s secretary of state. But it also dovetailed with the goals of the new House Democratic majority, whose leaders have included language intended to expand voter registration in the first bill they introduced when they took control of the chamber last month. The issue is also deeply personal for Ms. Abrams.

## [House Dems Say Their Reform Bill Would Solve Trump’s Ethics Nightmare](#)

### **The Huffington Post**

President Donald Trump has presided over one of the most unethical administrations in recent memory, and new laws are needed to stop it from happening again, ethics experts told Congress on Wednesday.... Most of the provisions in the bill covering executive branch ethics were included in response to the administration’s refusal to abide by previous norms. Those provisions include requirements that presidential transitions teams create ethics guidelines, vesting new

investigative authority in the Office of Government Ethics, mandating disclosure of ethics waivers and other filings and codifying previous executive orders on ethics. The bill would also express the sense of Congress that presidents should divest from their businesses.

## [Recent Political Scandals H.R. 1 Would Prevent from Recurring](#)

### **Center for American Progress**

Although the constant corrupt behavior can be disheartening and can reduce trust in government, there are concrete steps that lawmakers can take to address the abuses of President Trump and his allies and prevent them from recurring. The diverse class of newcomers to the U.S. House of Representatives, for example, is moving forward with clear, strong policy solutions. These lawmakers have joined forces with longtime anti-corruption champion Rep. John Sarbanes (D-MD), as well as an overwhelming majority of incumbent House Democrats and House leadership, including Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), to put forward the boldest anti-corruption and clean elections bill since the Watergate-related scandals of the early 1970s. H.R. 1, or the For the People Act, is the first bill introduced in the new Congress and would take a big stride toward snuffing out corruption, ending the dominance of big money in politics, ensuring public officials work for the public interest, and empowering voters. Below is a list of recent political scandals that H.R. 1 would help prevent from recurring, categorized by the legislation's three main sections.

## [Ted Deutch Wants to Reform Presidential Nominee Disclosures](#)

### **Florida Daily**

With Democrats taking over the U.S. House, U.S. Rep. Ted Deutch, D-Fla., now chairs the House Ethics Committee. From his new perch, this week, Deutch brought out a bill “that would close an Executive Branch ethics loophole and require presidential nominees to disclose certain political solicitations or donations.” Deutch teamed up with U.S. Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse, D-RI, to introduce the “Conflicts from Political Fundraising Act” on Monday. Deutch, the vice chairman of the Democracy Reform Task Force, weighed in on the bill on Monday. “When the president nominates people to the highest powers of our government, the public has a right to know whether they have a personal stake in the game that could affect their decision-making,” said Deutch.... Deutch reeled in six cosponsors including U.S. Rep. John Sarbanes, D-Mary., who chairs the Democracy Reform Task Force, and U.S. Rep. Steve Cohen, D-Tenn. The bill was sent to the U.S. House Oversight and Reform Committee.

## [Welch: For the People Act Would Expose Dark Money](#)

### **WCAX 3 (CBS Online)**

U.S. House Democrats have one bill at the top of their list-- HR.1, which would make Election Day a federal holiday. They call it the For the People Act. It's meant to expand access to voting, reduce the influence of big money in politics and strengthen ethics rules for public servants. We

talked to Congressman Peter Welch about it this week. "It's about trying to reform some of our own practices in the House. On campaign finance, it really calls to disclose where some of the secret dark money that has been flooding into the campaigns on both sides," said Welch.

## [Trump's Travel to Mar-a-Lago Costs Taxpayers More Than \\$64 Million](#)

### **The Washington Post**

Since his first month in office, with his first weekend forays to his private retreat in Florida — Mar-a-Lago — questions have been raised about the cost of those trips. This isn't simple to figure out, given that the total includes costs incurred by various government agencies as well as costs associated with Trump's Secret Service protection. Although estimates of the cost existed, it would require a great deal of information from across the government to come up with an accurate total. The Government Accountability Office gathered that information. On Tuesday, it released a report looking only at Trump's first four trips to Mar-a-Lago as president.... The total? Just under \$14 million, for an average cost of \$3.4 million per trip.... If we, therefore, assume a blanket average of \$3.4 million per trip, regardless of duration, the total the government has spent on Trump's trips to the resort tops \$64 million.

## [Trump Chooses a Former Oil Lobbyist to Head the Interior Dept.](#)

### **The New York Times**

President Trump on Monday announced he would nominate David Bernhardt, a former oil lobbyist and current deputy chief of the Interior Department, to succeed Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, who resigned amid allegations of ethical missteps. In a message on Twitter, Mr. Trump wrote, "David has done a fantastic job from the day he arrived, and we look forward to having his nomination officially confirmed!" While Mr. Zinke had been the public face of some of the largest rollbacks of public-land protections in the nation's history, Mr. Bernhardt was the one quietly pulling the levers to carry them out, opening millions of acres of land and water to oil, gas and coal companies. He is described by allies and opponents alike as having played a crucial role in advancing what Mr. Trump has described as an "energy dominance" agenda for the country.... Echoing a frequent critique of Mr. Bernhardt, [environmental law expert Mark] Squillace emphasized that the former energy lobbyist and lawyer, if confirmed by the Senate, would have broad authority to shape rules that affect his former clients. "That's my concern with Bernhardt, his ties to industry," Mr. Squillace said.

*\*Related Story: [Zinke's #2 Has to Carry a List of His Potential Conflicts of Interest.](#)*

## [Former Koch Official Runs EPA Chemical Research](#)

### **POLITICO**

The Trump administration has placed a former Koch Industries official in charge of research that will shape how the government regulates a class of toxic chemicals contaminating millions of



Americans' drinking water — an issue that could have major financial repercussions for his former employer. David Dunlap, a deputy in EPA's Office of Research and Development, is playing a key role as the agency decides how to protect people from the pollution left behind at hundreds of military bases and factories across the country.... Previously undisclosed documents show Dunlap began working on the issue almost immediately upon arriving at EPA in October. He had spent the previous eight years as Koch Industries' lead expert on water and chemical regulations, a position that typically includes helping companies to limit regulatory restrictions and liability for cleanups.

## [Company of Trump Inaugural Chair Sought to Profit from Connections](#)

### **WYNYC**

The investment firm founded by the chairman of Donald Trump's inaugural committee, Tom Barrack, developed a plan to profit off its connections to the incoming administration and foreign dignitaries, according to a confidential memo obtained by WNYC and ProPublica. "The key is to strategically cultivate domestic and international relations while avoiding any appearance of lobbying," the memo says. Colony, which primarily invests in real estate, sought to capitalize on its access to the White House to get an early lead on infrastructure investments and to attract assets from potential investors. Federal prosecutors in Manhattan on Monday subpoenaed documents from the nonprofit 58th Presidential Inaugural Committee, including anything related to foreign donations.... Investigators are probing whether foreigners gave money in exchange for influence with the incoming Trump administration, NBC News reported.

## [Firms Recruited by Paul Manafort Investigated Over Foreign Payments](#)

### **POLITICO**

Federal prosecutors in recent weeks have been interviewing witnesses about the flow of foreign money to three powerful law and lobbying firms that Paul Manafort recruited seven years ago to help improve the image of the Russia-aligned president of Ukraine, people familiar with the questioning said. The previously unreported interviews about the flow of the money are among the latest developments in the investigation of key figures who worked at the three firms — Mercury Public Affairs, the Podesta Group and Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom.... The focus by prosecutors on precisely how the firms were paid for their work highlights the ripple effects of the investigation by the special counsel, Robert S. Mueller III.... In recent weeks, people who worked with the firms on the Ukraine efforts have been summoned to Manhattan for daylong interviews with prosecutors and investigators, according to several people familiar with the questioning who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the ongoing investigation.... Questions have centered on what the firms' officials knew about who was funding and directing their work, which occurred in 2012 and 2013, whether they intentionally misrepresented the source of the money and, if so, why.

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## IN THE STATES

### [Court Rejects Settlement in Michigan Gerrymandering Suit](#)

#### **The Detroit News**

A lawsuit alleging partisan gerrymandering by Michigan's Republican-led Legislature is heading toward trial next week after a three-judge panel rejected a settlement proposed by Democratic Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson and plaintiffs. Benson does not have the authority to enter into the proposed consent decree without the blessing of the Michigan Legislature, the federal judges said Friday in a ruling rejecting the deal, which would have required reconfiguration of at least 11 state House seats for 2020 elections. A trial in the high-stakes case is set to start Tuesday, but the U.S. Supreme Court could still intervene. GOP attorneys are attempting to delay the case, and Justice Sonia Sotomayor on Friday asked parties wishing to weigh in to do so by Monday at 11 a.m., a sign the High Court is considering the request. The suit was filed on behalf of the League of Women Voters and a series of Democrats who allege that congressional and legislative district boundaries approved by the Legislature in 2011 were designed to benefit Republican candidates.

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## KEY OPINION

### [Why I'm No Longer Accepting Corporate PAC Money](#)

#### **CNN (Op-Ed by Jim McGovern)**

This is not the political system our founders envisioned. Of course it takes money to win elections. But the never-ending fundraising required to win an election takes too much of our attention away from the real work of serving our constituents and our country. It also makes individuals who are not well off or well-connected think twice before running for office. That's why I'm proud that the new Democratic majority in the House proposed, as one of our first items of business, H.R. 1 – a sweeping elections and campaign reform bill that will remove the roadblocks many eligible Americans face on their way to the ballot box and help end the dominance of big money in politics. As the new chairman of the House Rules Committee, I look forward to bringing H.R. 1 to the floor for debate. But I've also come to believe that I must do more than just support legislation to end the dominance of big money in politics. I need to change the way I run my own campaign fundraising. Over the past year, I've been asked by my constituents whether I would stop taking corporate PAC money for my campaign. I'll be honest – at first, I was reluctant to consider such a big change. And it's important to state that I've never let a donation from anyone influence my vote. If corporate PACs have tried to buy my vote by cutting me a campaign check, they've ended



up with a low return on their so-called investment. My voting record speaks for itself. Still, I was hesitant that I would put myself at a disadvantage against a well-funded opponent.

## [The Great American Heist](#)

### **Esquire (Editorial)**

Donald Trump's improbable ascension to the American presidency was a Bat Signal to some of the most accomplished grifters and scoundrels this fine country has to offer. They jumped on the nearest airplane—preferably private, and paid for by someone else—and jetted off to Washington, D.C., to carve out their piece of the action.... As we embark on a third year of The Trump Era, a new group has filtered in to populate the most senior levels of his government. The Class of 2019 is different in kind to the right-wing oddballs and ravenous feeders at the public trough that went barreling into the administration in January 2017.... The folks taking their place are The Operators, the Beltway veterans with deep ties to the industries they are now tasked with regulating.

## [Election Participation More Complicated Than Giving Time Off](#)

### **The Winchester Sun (Editorial)**

While Republican leadership — including Kentucky Sen. Mitch McConnell — has made it clear the chances are slim, we think a recent push to make election day a national holiday is another step toward making voting more accessible for Americans. The Election Day Holiday Act was proposed by Democrats this month with the aim of making changes to expand voter rights, reform election ethics and reduce the role of money in politics — none of which sound like a bad idea to us. The movement to make election day a national holiday is not a new one. Similar bills have been proposed in 2001, 2002 and 2005 with no progress. While most states, including Kentucky, require employers to provide employees time to go to the polls, there is not a federal law guaranteeing time off for voting. Most federal holiday are set aside as celebrations or to honor a significant figure in American history. What is more deserving of being celebrated than our democracy, our freedom and our rights as Americans to vote?

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