



DEMOCRACY REFORM TASK FORCE WEEKLY NEWS ROUND UP

March 2, 2018

NATIONAL NEWS

[Trump's Corruption Should Be Central Issue in Midterms](#)

Vox

Democrats are still licking their wounds from the presidential election, afraid to return to a strategy that many believe cost Hillary Clinton the White House: excessively focusing on Donald Trump's personal flaws rather than policy. It might have been the wrong choice then, but a swing back closer to it is the right approach now, especially on Trump and corruption.... Trump's exploitation of loopholes in American conflict of interest law, after all, is a policy issue. And with the economy doing fine and America's low-key drone wars not directly impacting most voters, it's clear that for better or worse the central political issue in American politics is Trump himself.... This is, on some level, obvious. Yet Democrats feel so burned by Clinton's missteps that they risk overcorrecting. "You cannot just run against Donald Trump," Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer warned his co-partisans in a February speech in Kentucky.

[Mueller Asks About Trump's Russian Dealings Prior to Run for President](#)

CNN

Investigators for special counsel Robert Mueller have recently been asking witnesses about Donald Trump's business activities in Russia prior to the 2016 presidential campaign as he considered a run for president, according to three people familiar with the matter. Questions to some witnesses during wide-ranging interviews included the timing of Trump's decision to seek the presidency, potentially compromising information the Russians may have had about him, and why efforts to brand a Trump Tower in Moscow fell through, two sources said. The lines of inquiry indicate Mueller's team is reaching beyond the campaign to explore how the Russians might have sought to influence Trump at a time when he was discussing deals in Moscow and contemplating a presidential run. Mueller was appointed to investigate Russian meddling in the 2016 campaign. The President claims that any investigation of his family's finances would be a

breach of the special counsel's mandate. Two of the sources said they do not know from the questions asked whether Mueller has concrete evidence to indicate wrongdoing.

[Emoluments Suit vs. Trump Now Personal as Well as Official](#)

The Associated Press

Attorneys general of Maryland and the District of Columbia on Friday expanded their lawsuit accusing President Donald Trump of accepting gifts from foreign and state governments, suing him not only as president but in his personal capacity as a businessman. Legal experts say the move takes the "emoluments" clause of the Constitution into uncharted legal waters, since it has been interpreted as only applying to presidents in their official capacity.... The lawsuit, filed in federal court in Maryland, is one of several recent cases challenging Trump's ties to his business ventures and his refusal to divest from them.

[Police Handcuff a Guard at Trump's Panama Hotel as Standoff Escalates](#)

The Washington Post

With that, this bizarre standoff turned a theoretical concern about the Trump administration — that, someday, the president's private business might be investigated by a foreign government — into a reality. "The fear has always been that there would be an international incident involving the finances of the president, and the president would have his loyalties questioned," said Jordan Libowitz of the watchdog group Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics.

[RNC Started Paying Trump Campaign's Rent at Trump Tower](#)

CNBC

Soon after the Republican National Committee came under pressure for paying legal bills for President Donald Trump and his eldest son in the special counsel's Russia probe, it started covering expenses for the president's re-election campaign. The RNC is using campaign funds to pay Trump's company more than \$37,000 a month in rent, and to pay thousands of dollars in monthly salary to Vice President Mike Pence's nephew, John Pence, party officials confirmed this week. The rent pays for office space in the Trump Tower in New York for the staff of Trump's re-election campaign. John Pence is the Trump campaign's deputy executive director. Campaign finance experts said this type of spending by a party committee on behalf of a campaign is highly unusual but legal, and it appears the RNC disclosed it correctly.

[Trumps Part Ways with Adviser Amid Backlash Over Inaugural Contract](#)

The New York Times

The first lady, Melania Trump, has parted ways with an adviser after news about the adviser's firm reaping \$26 million in payments to help plan President Trump's inauguration. Stephanie Winston Wolkoff, who has been friends with Mrs. Trump for years, had been working on a contract basis as an unpaid senior adviser to the office of the first lady. Stephanie Grisham, Mrs. Trump's spokeswoman, said the office had "severed the gratuitous services contract with Ms. Wolkoff," who Ms. Grisham said had been employed as "a special government employee" to work on specific projects.... They said the move was prompted by displeasure from the Trumps over the news that a firm created by Ms. Winston Wolkoff was paid nearly \$26 million for event planning by a nonprofit group that oversaw Mr. Trump's inauguration and surrounding events in January 2017.... Mr. Trump, who is notoriously tight with money, was also enraged to learn that Ms. Winston Wolkoff brought on an associate, David Monn, to help plan inaugural events, according to people who spoke to him. Mr. Monn's firm was paid \$3.7 million, according to a tax filing by the nonprofit group, the 58th Presidential Inaugural Committee.... Ms. Winston Wolkoff, in an email, defended her work on the inauguration, denounced news coverage of it and challenged the characterization that her contract with Mrs. Trump's office was terminated as a result of the news about payments from the inaugural committee.

[Legal Defense Fund Launches Amid Questions About Donor Transparency](#)

The Washington Post

A new legal defense fund designed to help defray the costs faced by aides to President Trump drawn into the various Russia investigations has yet to answer key questions regarding how it will vet donors and provide transparency about the contributors who finance the effort. The Patriot Legal Expense Fund Trust filed paperwork Tuesday with the Internal Revenue Service and the Delaware secretary of state, declaring it will operate as a political committee and help defray the legal costs of "eligible persons" involved in the investigations. The trust plans to allow both individuals and "entities" to make unlimited donations that will be pooled to defray the costs of multiple recipients, according to paperwork filed in January with the Office of Government Ethics. But the filings offered little insight into how the fund will operate, raising concerns about its transparency and how it will comply with conflict of interest rules.

[Hicks's Evasiveness Shows How Far Trump Is Pushing Executive Privilege](#)

The Washington Post

Republicans and Democrats on the House Intelligence Committee said after Hicks wrapped up a nine-hour, closed-door interview last night that she would not discuss anything from the inauguration forward. Fights over executive privilege come up with every president — Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton both lost significant court cases when they claimed it — but nonpartisan experts and veterans of previous administrations say Trump appears to be pushing the limits further than his predecessors and beyond what legal precedents allow for. Hicks did not

formally invoke executive privilege, but lawmakers said she told them that the White House asked her to only discuss events from the campaign. Later in the day, she agreed to answer some inquiries related to the transition. But she would not say anything about her 13 months in the West Wing, including the role she played in drafting a misleading statement aboard Air Force One about the June 2016 meeting between a Russian emissary and Trump leaders.

[Kushner's Business Got Loans After White House Meetings](#)

The New York Times

Early last year, a private equity billionaire started paying regular visits to the White House. Joshua Harris, a founder of Apollo Global Management, was advising Trump administration officials on infrastructure policy. During that period, he met on multiple occasions with Jared Kushner, President Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser, said three people familiar with the meetings. Among other things, the two men discussed a possible White House job for Mr. Harris. The job never materialized, but in November, Apollo lent \$184 million to Mr. Kushner's family real estate firm, Kushner Companies. The loan was to refinance the mortgage on a Chicago skyscraper. Even by the standards of Apollo, one of the world's largest private equity firms, the previously unreported transaction with the Kushners was a big deal: It was triple the size of the average property loan made by Apollo's real estate lending arm, securities filings show. It was one of the largest loans Kushner Companies received last year.

**Related Story: [Security Clearances Downgraded for Kushner and Other WH Officials](#) .*

**Related Story: [Kushner's Overseas Contacts Raise Concerns as Foreign Officials Seek Leverage](#).*

**Related Story: [Kushner's Real Estate Firm Sought Money from Qatar Gov't Weeks Before Blockade](#).*

[Ben Carson's HUD, Planning Cuts, Spends \\$31K on Office Furniture](#)

The New York Times

Department of Housing and Urban Development officials spent \$31,000 on a new dining room set for Secretary Ben Carson's office in late 2017 — just as the White House circulated its plans to slash HUD's programs for the homeless, elderly and poor, according to federal procurement records. The purchase of the custom hardwood table, chairs and hutch came a month after a top agency staff member filed a whistle-blower complaint charging Mr. Carson's wife, Candy Carson, with pressuring department officials to find money for the expensive redecoration of his offices, even if it meant circumventing the law. Mr. Carson is also facing questions on another front. Under pressure earlier this month, he requested that HUD's inspector general investigate his son's involvement in a department-sponsored listening tour of Baltimore last summer. Department lawyers had warned Mr. Carson that including Ben Carson Jr., an entrepreneur who does business with the federal government, could create a conflict of

interest. Mr. Carson “didn’t know the table had been purchased,” but does not believe the cost was too steep and does not intend to return it, said Raffi Williams, a HUD spokesman.

**Related Story: [HUD Employee Claims Demotion After Flagging Carson's Furniture Purchase.](#)*

[Secretary Zinke's NRA Visit Among Several Trips Being Questioned](#)

CNN

In September, women gun owners and enthusiasts from the National Rifle Association headed to a plush Four Seasons resort in Texas for an annual retreat and clay shooting at the Dallas Gun Club with one of the weekend's headliners: Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke. Zinke went to target practice with the women, posting about their marksmanship on Twitter -- #GalsWithGuns -- as part of his two-night stay. He also stopped at a posh office park in Dallas to meet with a small group that included wealthy Republican donors who raised money for Trump's presidential campaign. The meeting appears on the secretary's official schedule as an informal luncheon with community leaders focused on sporting and conservation.

[Anti-Secrecy Lawsuits Soaring Against Pruitt's EPA](#)

POLITICO

The EPA experienced a huge surge in open records lawsuits since President Donald Trump took office, an analysis of data reviewed by POLITICO shows — a trend that comes amid mounting criticism of EPA's secrecy about Administrator Scott Pruitt’s travels, meetings and policy decisions. The legal attacks also reflect widespread interest in the sweeping changes Pruitt is enacting. The suits have come from open government groups, environmentalists and even conservative organizations that have run into a wall trying to pry information out of Pruitt’s agency. The documents they’re seeking involve a broad swath of decisions, ranging from EPA’s reversals of the Obama administration’s landmark climate change and water rules to pesticide approvals and plans for dealing with the nation’s most polluted toxic waste sites.

[In Russia Probes, Republicans Draw Red Line at Trump's Finances](#)

CNN

Top Republicans on Capitol Hill have made a concerted decision in their Russia inquiries: They are staying away from digging into the finances of President Donald Trump and his family. Six Republican leaders of key committees told CNN they see little reason to pursue those lines of inquiry or made no commitments to do so -- even as Democrats say determining whether there was a financial link between Trump, his family, his business and Russians is essential to understanding whether there was any collusion in the 2016 elections. Republicans have resisted calls to issue subpoenas for bank records, seeking Trump's tax returns or sending

letters to witnesses to determine whether there were any Trump financial links to Russian actors -- calling the push nothing more than a Democratic fishing expedition.

[NRA Cites Policy Barring Foreign Funds to Fend Off Russia Questions](#)

Kansas City Star

The National Rifle Association's top lawyer, responding to a senator's request for documents about possible financial dealings with Russians during the 2016 election campaign, cited a "longstanding policy" by the powerful gun lobby group not to accept funds from foreign individuals or entities for election purposes. Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden of Oregon, a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee that is probing Russian influence on the election, sought the documents after McClatchy reported last month that the FBI was investigating whether a top Russian banker, Alexander Torshin, may have illegally funneled money to the group. Torshin is a lifetime NRA member who has attended several of the organization's national conferences.... The NRA was the biggest financial backer of Donald Trump's Republican presidential campaign, spending at least \$30 million on his behalf.

[Koch Document Reveals Laundry List of Policy Victories from Trump](#)

The Intercept

In the backdrop of a chaotic first year of Donald Trump's presidency, the conservative Koch brothers have won victory after victory in their bid to reshape American government to their interests. Documents show that the network of wealthy donors led by billionaire industrialists Charles and David Koch have taken credit for a laundry list of policy achievements extracted from the Trump administration and their allies in Congress. The donors have pumped campaign contributions not only to GOP lawmakers, but also to an array of third-party organizations that have pressured officials to act swiftly to roll back limits on pollution, approve new pipeline projects, and extend the largest set of upper-income tax breaks in generations.

**Related Story:* [10 Super-Rich People Dominate Super PAC Giving Ahead of Midterm Elections.](#)

[Trump Ally Was in Talks to Earn Millions by Ending 1MDB Probe in U.S.](#)

The Wall Street Journal

A top Republican fundraiser close to President Donald Trump was in negotiations to earn tens of millions of dollars if the U.S. Justice Department dropped its investigation into a multibillion-dollar graft scandal involving a Malaysian state investment fund, according to emails reviewed by The Wall Street Journal.... In emails dated during the past year, Elliott Broidy, a venture capitalist and a longtime Republican donor, and his wife, Robin Rosenzweig, an attorney, discuss setting up a consulting contract with Jho Low.

[Provisions Attached to Budget Bills May Reshape Campaign Finance Laws](#)

The Washington Post

A handful of provisions tucked into a pair of must-pass bills under consideration in Congress this month could reshape the financing of political campaigns and give further cover to donors who want to keep their contributions private. One measure would roll back limits on churches, which are prohibited under current law from advocating for candidates because of their tax-exempt status. Other changes would relax rules affecting secret and wealthy donors and increase the amount of cash that political parties could spend on candidates. The adjustments are being considered in the form of “riders,” or provisions that are tacked on to unrelated bills. Such attachments are controversial because they can pass without a separate vote or debate. The maneuver also masks the identity of the member of Congress who proposed each change.

**Related Story: [Reform Groups and Watchdogs Urge Congress to Oppose Poison Pill Campaign Finance Riders in FY18 Omnibus Appropriations Bill.](#)*

IN THE STATES

[Might Be the Most Expensive Year for Connecticut's Clean Elections](#)

Hartford Courant

The crowded field for governor means it could be the costliest year yet for Connecticut’s public campaign finance program, intensifying criticism from Republicans who say taxpayer dollars shouldn’t be used to fund political campaigns. With an expected price tag this year approaching \$40 million, the program has been a frequent target for budget cuts as the state faces perpetual deficits, even among gubernatorial candidates who plan to apply for an election grant. Under the current system, candidates for all state offices, from governor down to state representative, collect a certain amount of small-dollar donations to receive a matching grant.... The cost of the program is expected to balloon this year due to the large number of Republicans and Democrats vying to succeed Gov. Dannel P. Malloy and the lack of a front-runner on either side. Political observers expect primaries on both sides, with the potential for as many as five candidates in either race.... But the program’s defenders say the benefits of the CEP outweigh its costs, even this year. The public financing program had bipartisan support when it passed in 2005 as part of a series of election reforms that were adopted after former Gov. John G. Rowland was sent to prison on corruption charges.

[House to Pass Campaign Ad Disclosure Requirements on Facebook](#)

VT Digger

The Vermont House advanced a measure Thursday that would clarify disclosure requirements for candidates and others who pay for online political advertisements. Bill H.828 would require individuals, candidates, political parties and committees who pay to distribute political ads on social media, including Facebook and Twitter, to identify themselves and the candidates they support in the advertisements. Under state law, disclosures are required for political advertisements on television and radio and in print and online. Rep. John Gannon, D-Wilmington, who sponsored the bill, said Vermont statutes need to be updated because they don't address social media advertising explicitly. "While Vermont campaign finance law currently applies to online advertising, it did not ... envision a world of Google Adwords, Facebook and other forms of social media advertising," he said on the House Floor Thursday.

[Dems Invest in Gerrymandering Fight, Promise Maps Won't Be Unfair](#)

The Huffington Post

Democratic governors are planning to invest at least \$20 million dollars this year in gubernatorial races that could determine which party has control over drawing electoral boundaries in 2021. The Democratic Governors Association's announcement signals that the party is increasingly focusing on state races that could impact redistricting. Republicans, targeting low-profile state races in 2010, won those races and were able to draw congressional and statewide lines that significantly benefited the party. Congressional redistricting is only done once each decade, so control over the process has enduring consequences. The Brennan Center for Justice estimates Republicans hold an additional 16 seats to 17 seats in Congress because of gerrymandered maps. During a press conference on Friday, Govs. Jay Inslee (Wash.), Dannel Malloy (Conn.) and Tom Wolf (Penn.) said the money would be spent in eight states: Colorado, Nevada, Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Maine and Florida.

KEY OPINION

[Well-Heeled Investors Reap the Republican Tax Cut Bonanza](#)

The New York Times (Editorial Board)

After President Trump signed the Republican tax cut into law, companies put out cheery announcements that they were giving workers bonuses because of their expected windfalls from the tax reductions. The president and Republican lawmakers quickly held up these news releases as vindication for their argument that cutting the top federal corporate tax rate to 21 percent, from 35 percent, would boost workers' incomes even as it added \$1.5 trillion to the

debt that future generations would have to pay off. Now corporate announcements and analyst reports confirm what honest observers always said — this claim is pure fantasy. As executives tell investors what they intend to do with their tax savings and their spending plans are tabulated into neat charts and graphs, the reports jibe with what most experts said would happen: Companies are rewarding their stockholders. Businesses are buying back shares, which creates demand for the stocks, boosts share prices and benefits investors. Some of the cash is going to increase dividends. And a chunk will go to acquiring other businesses.

[Ben Carson and the Trump Lifestyle](#)

The Baltimore Sun (Editorial Board)

It never pays for public officials to appear to be living high on the hog. Well, almost never. At least that's the advice we should have given a certain former Johns Hopkins neurosurgeon who took up politics only recently and now finds himself defending a \$31,561 dining room set the taxpayers purchased for his office suite at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. And, apparently, he didn't even get to pick it out. The problem, of course, is that while the agency in charge of helping the poorest Americans find decent housing was ordering a custom-made table for the secretary's personal space, HUD officials were also planning how best to make substantial reductions to programs that help the elderly and homeless. And, worst of all, people noticed. A senior agency official claims Dr. Carson's wife, Candy Carson, has spearheaded an effort to spend lavishly on that same office space — even if it means going around federal rules that require congressional approval for any spending on a department head above \$5,000 — and the official filed a whistleblower complaint about it.

[In Any Other Presidency, the Secretary of the VA Would Be Gone](#)

LA Times (Op-ed by Walter Shaub)

For his part, Shulkin attacked the VA's inspector general as having an "agenda." He also claimed hackers altered the federal record that his chief of staff used to get the VA to cover his wife's travel expenses. One day after the inspector general released the report, and notwithstanding a denial and defense issued by his private attorneys, Shulkin told Congress he had ponied up for his wife's travel expenses and for the Wimbledon tickets. His chief of staff retired a day later. A few days after that, Shulkin announced a plan to purge the VA of everyone who engaged in "subversion" against him. The inspector general's report delicately concludes that the information Shulkin provided to the VA's ethics office was "insufficient to accurately describe his or his wife's relationship" with the supplier of the Wimbledon tickets as a "personal friendship." The evidence is more than enough to warrant Shulkin's termination. Or it would be, if the Trump administration cared about government ethics.

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