



DEMOCRACY REFORM TASK FORCE WEEKLY NEWS ROUND UP

April 6, 2018

NATIONAL NEWS

[Scott Pruitt's Job in Jeopardy Amid Expanding Ethics Issues](#)

The Washington Post

Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Scott Pruitt fought for his job Thursday, facing a new barrage of allegations about issues ranging from his past housing arrangement and first-class travel to the reassignment of senior staff who criticized how he was spending taxpayer funds. Even as President Trump repeatedly expressed his support for Pruitt in public, top White House aides began to escalate their disapproval, suggesting the administrator has mischaracterized his role in boosting the salaries of two employees.

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[Mueller's Team Questioning Russian Oligarchs](#)

CNN

Special counsel Robert Mueller's team has taken the unusual step of questioning Russian oligarchs who traveled into the U.S., stopping at least one and searching his electronic devices when his private jet landed at a New York area airport, according to multiple sources familiar with the inquiry. A second Russian oligarch was stopped during a recent trip to the U.S., although it is not clear if he was searched, according to a person briefed on the matter. Mueller's team has also made an informal voluntary document and interview request to a third Russian oligarch who has not traveled to the U.S. recently. The situations have one thing in common: Investigators are asking whether wealthy Russians illegally funneled cash donations directly or indirectly into Donald Trump's presidential campaign and inauguration.

**Related Story: [Putin Friendly Oligarch's Top U.S. Executive Donated \\$285,000 to Trump.](#)*

[Trump to Host Japanese Prime Minister at Mar-a-Lago](#)

The Hill

President Trump will host Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at Mar-a-Lago this month, the White House announced on Monday. Trump and Abe will meet in Palm Beach, Fla., from April 17-18 to address trade negotiations and relations with North Korea, including Trump's possible future meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. "The two leaders will discuss the international campaign to maintain maximum pressure on North Korea in advance of President Trump's planned meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un," White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said in a statement. "President Trump and Prime Minister Abe will explore ways to expand fair and reciprocal trade and investment ties between the United States and Japan, two of the world's wealthiest and most innovative economies."

[FEC Increases Scrutiny of Zinke's Former PAC](#)

POLITICO

The Federal Election Commission is asking a leadership PAC previously affiliated with Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke to account for more than \$600,000 of previously unreported contributions from the first six months of 2017. For most of the period in question, the committee, SEAL PAC, was overseen by Vincent DeVito, who is now a top aide to Zinke at the Interior Department, and this is the second time federal regulators have looked into discrepancies during his tenure. Zinke launched SEAL PAC when he was elected to Congress in 2014 and disaffiliated himself from the group after being selected to join President Donald Trump's Cabinet; DeVito was listed as the group's treasurer until May, when he too joined the administration.

[Mulvaney, Consumer Bureau's Chief, Urges Congress to Cripple Agency](#)

The New York Times

In his first report to Congress as the acting director of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, Mick Mulvaney called on lawmakers on Monday to cripple the agency that he has been temporarily tasked with overseeing. Mr. Mulvaney, a longtime and unapologetic critic of the financial crisis-era bureau, has spent the last several months freezing its enforcement activities, dropping cases on payday lenders and shutting out career staff from major decisions. He has called for the bureau to be more “humble” and less aggressive in its efforts to protect consumers and to consider the impact on businesses when making decisions. Being on the inside seems to have only redoubled Mr. Mulvaney’s concerns about the bureau’s mandate, which he first expressed while representing South Carolina as a Republican in the House. “The bureau is far too powerful, and with precious little oversight of its activities,” Mr. Mulvaney, who is also director of the White House’s Office of Management and Budget, said in a message accompanying a 56-page report to Congress that was released on Monday.

[John Bolton to Stop All Political Activities Through His Outside Groups](#)

ABC News

As John Bolton exits the GOP political scene for his new stint at the White House, he leaves behind more than \$3 million in the bank accounts of his political organizations that have funneled big bucks into federal elections over the years, according to Federal Election Commission records. The organizations, John Bolton PAC and John Bolton Super PAC, branded after and led by the former United Nations ambassador, announced Thursday afternoon that the groups are suspending all future political activities until further notice as of March 31, 2018. “Ambassador Bolton is proud of the tremendous success of his super PAC, which helped elect many conservative leaders who have made strong national security policies a top priority,” the super PAC web site stated.

[House Dems Seek Information About Trump Aides' Legal-Defense Fund](#)

The Washington Post

Democrats on the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee raised concerns Monday about the transparency of a legal-defense fund to help defray the costs faced by aides to President Trump who have been drawn into the various Russia investigations. They requested that the Office of Government Ethics produce records that would open up the trust’s operations. In a letter sent to OGE Director David Apol on Monday, Democratic lawmakers requested a slew of documents that would show how the fund was established, which concerns were raised during the planning process, and how and whether those issues were resolved. They requested that the office provide the documents by April 12 and that a representative from OGE provide a briefing to the committee by April 13.

[The Most Powerful Lobbyist in Trump's Washington](#)

POLITICO

Ballard's relationship with Trump has helped him solve a lucrative puzzle that has frustrated more established players. For all of the president's "drain the swamp" rhetoric, the new administration has given corporate America and its lobbyists the opportunity to revive dreams of tax cuts, regulatory rollbacks and rule changes that were mothballed during the Obama administration. But Trump also presents a challenge for the influence business — a White House in which key positions at least initially were as likely to be staffed by Trump loyalists as by old Washington hands with ties to K Street. Ballard has helped to bridge the gap. He's a Trump-friendly out-of-towner who can connect with the establishment — he is a close ally of Senator Marco Rubio as well as Charlie Crist, the former centrist Republican governor of Florida who is now a Democratic congressman — and make corporate clients comfortable.

[Conservative 'Dark Money' Group Faces IRS Complaint Over Tax Filings](#)

Public Integrity

A conservative "dark money" organization hasn't been filing its federal taxes, and two watchdog organizations are asking the IRS to levy penalties. Americans for Job Security, a nonprofit trade organization that spent millions of dollars boosting Republican congressional candidates, hasn't filed its taxes in three years, according to Issue One and the Campaign Legal Center, which filed a formal complaint this morning. Not filing tax returns is a failure to comply with federal rules governing nonprofits, Issue One Executive Director Meredith McGehee said. "The IRS should not let this, or any other dark money group, off the hook for failing to follow these simple rules," she said.

[Mercer Backed Secretive Group Targeting Anti-Muslim Ads to Swing Voters](#)

Open Secrets

As the final weeks of the 2016 elections ticked down, voters in swing states like Nevada and North Carolina began seeing eerie promotional travel ads as they scrolled through their Facebook feeds or clicked through Google sites. In one, a woman with a French accent cheerfully welcomes visitors to the "Islamic State of France," where "under Sharia law, you can enjoy everything the Islamic State of France has to offer, as long as you follow the rules." The video has a Man in the High Tower feel. Iconic French tourist sites are both familiar and transformed — the Eiffel Tower is capped with a star and crescent and the spires of the Notre Dame are replaced with the domed *qubba* of a mosque. The Mona Lisa is shown looking, the ad says, "as a woman should," covered in a burka.

**Related Story: [Amount Robert Mercer Spent on Politics in 2016 Probably Topped \\$30 Million.](#)*

[Facebook Donated to Committee Members That Will Question Zuckerberg](#)

USA Today News

Members of the House and Senate committees that will question Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg about user privacy protection next week are also some of the biggest recipients of campaign contributions from company employees and the Facebook Inc. PAC. The committee that got the most Facebook contributions is the House Energy and Commerce Committee, which announced Wednesday morning it would question Zuckerberg on April 11. Members of the committee, whose jurisdiction gives it regulatory power over internet companies, received nearly \$381,000 in contributions tied to Facebook since 2007, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. The second-highest total, \$369,000, went to members of the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, which announced later that it would have a joint hearing with the Senate Judiciary Committee to question Zuckerberg on Tuesday. Judiciary Committee members have received \$235,000 in Facebook contributions.

[I Hacked an Election. So Can the Russians. \[Video\]](#)

The New York Times (Opinion)

[Charitable Giving by Corporations Is Also About Getting](#)

The New York Times

Just months before the midterm congressional elections, a group of economists have published an analysis of how corporate America is spreading its philanthropic wealth. Sifting through the donations to charity from 1998 to 2015 by foundations set up by the largest companies in the United States — those in the Fortune 500 or the Standard & Poor's 500-stock index — Marianne Bertrand of the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business; Matilde Bombardini and Francesco Trebbi of the University of British Columbia; and Raymond Fisman of Boston University detected a pattern of contributions to 1,087 charities linked to 451 members of Congress. Turns out that the spending is a little more self-serving than companies would have us believe. Some of the charitable giving looks a lot like corporate lobbying. Because companies get a break for such giving, it amounts to political spending at taxpayers' expense. "Firms deploy their charitable foundations as a form of tax-exempt influence seeking," the researchers write. Think of it like this: One way a company could please Senator Chuck Grassley, the Iowa Republican who leads the Judiciary Committee and is a member of the committees on finance, agriculture, the budget and taxation, would be to have a corporate political action committee donate directly to his campaign. But there is another way, one that often slips below the radar of campaign-finance watchdogs. Why not donate to the Partnership for a Drug-Free Iowa, where the senator has been an honorary advisory board member?

[The Rise of the Anti-PAC Democrat](#)

PBS News Hour

A growing number of Democrats running for Congress in 2018 are foregoing contributions from political action committees, opting for a more grassroots approach to fundraising in a bid to appeal to the party's progressive base. Candidates, progressive activists and Democratic consultants are betting the strategy will appeal to voters who are frustrated with the influence of money in politics. President Donald Trump tapped into that anger in 2016, as did Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., who made campaign finance reform a central part of his message.

Now, looking to the midterms, Democrats are "championing bold reform agendas, including getting dark money out of politics and limiting the influence of corporate special interests," Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee spokesman Tyler Law said in a statement. He added that the rejecting money from political action committees, or PACs, is "particularly powerful because it appeals to voters across the political spectrum."

[Reid, Kerry: Money Drives Partisanship, Gridlock in Congress](#)

The Seattle Times

Two retired Democrats who served in the U.S. Senate together for nearly three decades said Tuesday that money has been the driving force behind a dramatic rise in partisanship and resulting gridlock in Congress over the past decade. "Money is everything in politics today," former Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid said. "While money doesn't always get what it wants, it almost always gets gridlock instead," added ex-Secretary of State John Kerry. "And that's what we have today." The two appeared together at the launch of a biennial lecture series at the University of Nevada, Reno named after Reid, who retired in 2016 as Nevada's longest-serving U.S. senator. The inaugural topic was, "Bipartisanship and public service." Both blamed Republicans for blocking efforts to enact enforceable limits on campaign contributions from corporations, political parties and other campaign committees. They said the gridlock often is by design, orchestrated by corporate and business interests that want to thwart federal regulation.

IN THE STATES

[How a Small City is Taking on the Big Power of Dark Money](#)

The Nation

Late in January, a small army of right-wing oligarchs and political operatives gathered in Southern California for the Koch Network's annual winter seminar. They were there to learn

about the network's plans for the 2018 midterm Voters enter and exit from their polling station early, November 8, 2016, in Tempe, Arizona. They learned, for instance, that the sprawling political organization will spend at least \$400 million next fall to help the Republican Party maintain its majority in Congress. They learned that the network will target Senate Democrats in states where Trump was victorious in 2016, including Wisconsin, Indiana, and Missouri. They learned that the billionaire brothers and their backers will launch a massive direct-mail and get-out-the-vote effort beginning this summer. Relying on their vast financial resources, Charles and David Koch and their friends hope to fix the outcome of the democratic process.

KEY OPINION

[501 Days in Swamp](#)

The New York Magazine

This was no random spot. The very first place Trump headed after being sworn in — his true destination all along, in a sense — was the Old Post Office and Clock Tower, which only 12 days before the election had been repurposed as the Trump International Hotel Washington. The elegant granite structure, whose architectural character Trump had promised to preserve, was now besmirched by a gaudy, *faux*-gold sign bearing his name. The carefully choreographed stop sent a clear signal to the foreign governments, lobbyists, and corporate interests keen on currying favor in Washington: The rewards of government would now be reaped by a single man — and the people would bear the cost.

[Corruption, Not Russia, Is Trump's Greatest Political Liability](#)

The New York Magazine

Since Trump took office, his pledge to ignore his own interests has been almost forgotten, lost in a disorienting hurricane of endless news. It is not just a morbid joke but a legitimate problem for the opposition that all the bad news about Trump keeps getting obscured by other bad news about Trump. Perhaps the extraordinary civic unrest his presidency has provoked will be enough to give Democrats a historic win in the midterms this fall, but it is easy to be worried. Trump's approval rating hovers in the low 40s: lower than the average of any other president, yes, but seemingly impervious to an onslaught of scandals that would have sunk any other president, and within spitting range of reelectability. As the races pick up in earnest, some kind of narrative focus is going to be necessary to frame the case against Trump. Here, what appears to be an embarrassment of riches for Democrats may in fact be a collection of distractions. It is depressingly likely that several of Trump's most outrageous characteristics will fail to move the needle in the states and districts where the needle needs moving. His racism

and misogyny motivate the Democratic base, but both were perfectly apparent in 2016 and did not dissuade enough voters to abandon him.

[Don't Let Big Money Drown Out the Truth and Drown Out Your Voice](#)

The Washington Post (Op-Ed)

Spending by outside groups has also exploded. To date, these groups have spent nearly \$90 million this cycle, almost double the amount spent at this point four years ago. More than two-thirds of that money has come from Republican-leaning organizations, which rely heavily on funding from conservative mega-donors including the Koch brothers, Sheldon Adelson and the Mercer family. Much has come from “dark money” organizations that aren’t required to disclose their donors. One such group is the National Rifle Association’s Institute for Legislative Action, the nonprofit arm of the right-wing gun lobby, whose \$35.2 million spent in the 2016 election was the most of any dark-money organization.... Rather than selling out to match Republicans dollar for dollar, Democrats can increase their appeal to grass-roots voters by taking a firm stand against corporate influence. And by championing reform legislation such as the Government By the People Act, a plan introduced by Rep. John Sarbanes (D-Md.) that would implement a system of matching public funds in federal elections, Democrats can demonstrate that they are committed lifting up the voices of regular voters. Reform groups such as Every Voice have long argued that the effort to get big money out of politics must also bring people back in, which is what Sarbanes’s bill and many state and local reform laws do. The cost of elections today increases the power of the privileged few while diminishing that of working Americans and, as such, harms democracy itself.

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