



DEMOCRACY REFORM TASK FORCE WEEKLY NEWS ROUND UP

May 25, 2018

NATIONAL NEWS

[Democrats Just Rolled Out a Broad Reform Agenda](#)

The Washington Post

In 2006, Democrats seized both the House and Senate in the midterm elections. At the time, a deeply unpopular president was presiding over a deeply unpopular war. But in exit polls, the top issue that voters cited was government corruption.... Today I spoke to Rep. John Sarbanes (Md.), the Democrats' point person on this issue, who argued that this is something voters are eager for. "The public can get mad enough to reach for solutions that are pretty dramatic," he said. "Witness the person who's in the White House right now. So if they can get angry enough to produce that kind of change, I think they can get angry enough to insist that we actually fix their democratic institutions, and that's what we're trying to do with this program."

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[Only 1/3 of Americans Think Trump Is Successfully Draining The Swamp](#)

The Huffington Post

Just under one-third of Americans believe President Donald Trump has done even somewhat well at fulfilling his promise to “drain the swamp,” a new survey finds. Only 8 percent of those polled believe that Trump has done very well at eliminating government corruption, while 24 percent say he’s done somewhat well, 13 percent say he’s not done very well, and 39 percent sat he hasn’t done well at all. Opinions are, unsurprisingly, divided along political lines, although Trump’s opponents are both more unanimous and more emphatic in their distaste for his job performance. About three-quarters of Trump voters say the president has done at least somewhat well in draining the swamp, but just 22 percent saying he’s done very well.

[There Is Only One Trump Scandal](#)

The Atlantic

The sheer volume of Trump scandals can seem difficult to keep track of. There are not many Trump scandals. There is one Trump scandal. Singular: the corruption of the American government by the president and his associates, who are using their official power for personal and financial gain rather than for the welfare of the American people, and their attempts to shield that corruption from political consequences, public scrutiny, or legal accountability.

**Related Story: [Collusion Happened](#).*

**Related Story: [Trump's Corruption: Thanks to Koch Brothers, GOP Congress Is In on the Take](#).*

[The Three Biggest Surprises in the Trump Organization's Financial Filings](#)

The Washington Post

Last week, President Trump released his personal financial disclosures, giving the public its once-a-year glimpse inside the business he still owns from the Oval Office. On the day of the release, most of the attention focused on a single footnote on page 45 of the 92-page document — and a single, relatively small debt revealed in that footnote. In that note, President Trump admitted reimbursing his personal lawyer, Michael Cohen, for a \$100,000-plus expense.... The other 91 pages — which detailed the debts, assets and revenue streams during 2017 — also provided new details about how the Trump presidency has reshaped the Trump Organization. 1) Presidential visits do not always boost business. 2) Trump’s money-losing courses in Scotland and Ireland reported big gains in revenue. 3) The Trump Organization is not expanding like it once did — but its old deals are still paying well.

[Trump's D.C. Hotel Gave Sweetheart Rate to Pro-Immigrant Worker Group](#)

The Daily Beast

The Trump International Hotel Washington, D.C., commanded more than \$40.4 million in revenue in 2017 and it did so with a simple business strategy. To overcome a low occupancy rate, it charged President Donald Trump's supporters, and organizations hoping to curry favor, one of the highest room rates in the city. One group, however, got a sweetheart deal. And it just so happened to be in Washington D.C. to lobby for a policy benefiting the president's businesses. The Seasonal Employment Alliance held its H-2B fly-in from February 14–16, 2018 during which members descended on Capitol Hill to push for an increase in the visas that allow businesses to import temporary foreign workers. The H-2B program is popular with landscapers and farmers. It's also popular among golf course, resort, and hotel operators—like the Trump family—because it allows them to hire foreign workers to perform low-paying seasonal jobs that would often, otherwise, go unfilled.

[Trump Jr. and Aides Met With Gulf Emissary Offering Help to Win Election](#)

The New York Times

Three months before the 2016 election, a small group gathered at Trump Tower to meet with Donald Trump Jr., the president's eldest son. One was an Israeli specialist in social media manipulation. Another was an emissary for two wealthy Arab princes. The third was a Republican donor with a controversial past in the Middle East as a private security contractor. The meeting was convened primarily to offer help to the Trump team, and it forged relationships between the men and Trump insiders that would develop over the coming months — past the election and well into President Trump's first year in office, according to several people with knowledge of their encounters. Erik Prince, the private security contractor and the former head of Blackwater, arranged the meeting, which took place on Aug. 3, 2016. The emissary, George Nader, told Donald Trump Jr. that the princes who led Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were eager to help his father win election as president.

**Related Story: [The Princes, the President, and the Fortune Seekers.](#)*

**Related Story: [Broidy's Company Got Biggest U.S. Government Contract While Pitched Trump Admin.](#)*

[At Trump Tower, Cohen and Oligarch Discussed Russian Relations](#)

The New York Times

Eleven days before the presidential inauguration last year, a billionaire Russian businessman with ties to the Kremlin visited Trump Tower in Manhattan to meet with Donald J. Trump's personal lawyer and fixer, Michael D. Cohen, according to video footage and another person who attended the meeting. In Mr. Cohen's office on the 26th floor, he and the oligarch, Viktor

Vekselberg, discussed a mutual desire to strengthen Russia's relations with the United States under President Trump, according to Andrew Intrater, an American businessman who attended the meeting and invests money for Mr. Vekselberg. The men also arranged to see one another at the inauguration, the second of their three meetings, Mr. Intrater said.

**Related Story: [Cohen Helped Trump Donor Seek Investment from Qatar Fund.](#)*

**Related Story: [Michael Cohen's Business Partner Agrees to Cooperate Part of Plea Deal.](#)*

[Trump Lawyer 'Paid by Ukraine' to Arrange White House Talks](#)

BBC News

The payment was arranged by intermediaries acting for Ukraine's leader, Petro Poroshenko, the sources said, though Mr. Cohen was not registered as a representative of Ukraine as required by U.S. law. Mr. Cohen denies the allegation. The meeting at the White House was last June. Shortly after the Ukrainian president returned home, his country's anti-corruption agency stopped its investigation into Trump's former campaign manager, Paul Manafort. A high-ranking Ukrainian intelligence officer in Mr. Poroshenko's administration described what happened before the visit to the White House. Mr. Cohen was brought in, he said, because Ukraine's registered lobbyists and embassy in Washington D.C. could get Mr Poroshenko little more than a brief photo-op with Mr. Trump. Mr. Poroshenko needed something that could be portrayed as "talks"... Mr. Poroshenko decided to establish a back channel to Mr Trump.

[Pompeo Flashes Temper Over Question on Trump Business Interests](#)

The New York Times

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Thursday dismissed as "bizarre" and "outrageous" a Democratic senator's question about whether President Trump's business interests could be affecting his administration's foreign policy. In an exchange before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Mr. Pompeo grew testy when Senator Tom Udall, Democrat of New Mexico, asked how Mr. Trump's finances might impact his foreign policy decisions. It was the second time in as many days that the nation's new chief diplomat displayed a flash of anger during congressional testimony. "Given that the president refuses to disclose his tax returns, how can you assure the American people that American foreign policy is free of his personal conflicts of interest?" Mr. Udall asked. Mr. Pompeo first dismissed the question as "bizarre" and then grew heated. "I have been incredibly involved in this administration's foreign policy now for some 16 months, and I have seen literally no evidence of what you are scurrilously, scurrilously suggesting," Mr. Pompeo said, and then added: "It is an outrageous suggestion."

[Pruitt Spent at Least \\$9600 on Office Decor, Desks: Email](#)

The Hill

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) head Scott Pruitt spent at least \$9,600 to decorate his personal office with Smithsonian artwork, a refurbished desk and other framed items, according to an internal document obtained by The Hill on Tuesday. EPA paid \$1,950 for labor and delivery charges on three pieces of artwork loaned from the Smithsonian Institution to Pruitt's executive office suite and spent over \$2,500 to frame items that included a photo of him with President Trump and an American flag. Additionally, the document confirms earlier reports that agency officials paid \$2,963 for a standing "captain's" desk and another \$2,075 to refurbish another office desk for the administrator. The costs were tallied in a chart emailed to an EPA staffer in the general counsel's office last week that was labeled "expenses." While the Smithsonian doesn't charge federal agencies to rent items, the costs for the three paintings — one by William Louis Sonntag Sr., the others being portraits of Founding Fathers John Marshall and James Monroe — were labelled as for labor and delivery.

[EPA Hired a Major Republican Opposition Research Firm to Track Press](#)

Mother Jones

Using taxpayer dollars, the Environmental Protection Agency has hired a cutting-edge Republican PR firm that specializes in digging up opposition research to help Administrator Scott Pruitt's office track and shape press coverage of the agency. According to federal contracting records, earlier this month Pruitt's office inked a no-bid \$120,000 contract with Definers Corp., a Virginia-based public relations firm founded by Matt Rhoades, who managed Mitt Romney's 2012 presidential campaign. Following Romney's defeat, Rhoades established America Rising, an ostensibly independent political action committee that works closely with the Republican National Committee and Republican candidates to mine damning information on opponents. Other higher-ups at Definers include former RNC research director Joe Pounder, who's been described as "a master of opposition research," and senior vice president Colin Reed, an oppo-research guru billed as "among the leaders of the war on [Sen. Elizabeth] Warren." This for-profit consulting firm offers a variety of public relations services such as digital strategy, political consulting, and media relations.

[Bolton Relied on Ex-Lobbyist as He Staffed NSC](#)

POLITICO

As he prepared to start his job as President Donald Trump's national security adviser, John Bolton relied on the advice of a longtime colleague — Matthew Freedman, a consultant and former lobbyist with decades of experience in foreign policy. But while Freedman may have been a trusted hand, he also came on with a checkered past, having worked for now-indicted former Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort and, more recently, getting fired from the Trump transition team for reportedly using his global consulting firm email for transition work.

Still, Bolton leaned on Freedman earlier this year, and multiple people familiar with the matter said Freedman played a central role meeting with potential job applicants for the National Security Council before Bolton officially started.

[DOJ Apologizes for 'Oversight' on Trump Hotel Records Fight](#)

The National Law Journal

Justice Department lawyers made a rare apology to a federal judge Wednesday for an “inadvertent oversight” that occurred in a freedom of information lawsuit involving President Donald Trump’s Washington, D.C., hotel.

[Christie Blocks Disclosure of His Office's Emails with Kushner's Company](#)

MapLight

Former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie is blocking requests for copies of his office’s correspondence with the real estate company previously managed by Jared Kushner, President Trump’s son-in-law. Christie, whose eight-year administration spent almost \$1 million battling to keep public records secret, issued a letter in his last week in Trenton that declared any requests involving his office’s electronic records would be handled by his private lawyer, rather than by state employees. “The governor can’t just issue a letter and make everything nonpublic,” said Walter Luers, a Clinton, N.J., lawyer and expert on the state’s Open Public Records Act. But Jeff Chiesa, Christie’s attorney, used the letter as the basis for rejecting MapLight’s request for copies of emails between Christie’s office and the Kushner Companies -- even though he said his law firm had “identified a limited number of responsive documents.”

[Ryan-Linked Group Raised \\$24.6M from Anonymous Donor](#)

POLITICO

American Action Network, the nonprofit group closely aligned with House Speaker Paul Ryan, raised a record \$41.9 million amid the GOP push to repeal Obamacare and restructure the tax code — more than half of which came from one donor, according to a tax filing obtained by POLITICO. The money raised includes \$24.6 million from a single anonymous donor, according to AAN’s 2017 tax return, which covers July 2016 to June 2017 and was filed this week. As a “social welfare” group organized under section 501(c)(4) of the tax code, AAN can raise money in unlimited amounts, but it is not required to disclose its donors, unlike a super PAC. The eight-figure donation by itself almost eclipsed AAN’s previous fundraising high for an entire fiscal year. The group brought in \$27.5 million from July 2010 to June 2011.

[Farenthold May Have Been Hired Illegally at His New Lobbyist Job](#)

The Huffington Post

Disgraced former Rep. Blake Farenthold (R-Texas) may have been hired illegally at his new job at a Texas port authority, and a local newspaper on Monday filed a lawsuit that could result in his being ejected. Farenthold, who abruptly resigned from Congress last month while under investigation for sexual harassment, announced last week that he landed a gig as a lobbyist for the Calhoun Port Authority in Port Lavaca, Texas. The problem is that the local government entity did not give public notice that it was hiring Farenthold or that it was creating a job for him that pays \$160,000 a year. Under the Texas Open Meetings Act, public entities must give notice of actions being taken at upcoming meetings and allow for public comment. The port did give notice of its May 9 meeting, but it used vague language about personnel matters.

[FEC Can't Decide If Russian Inference Violated Law](#)

NPR

As tech companies and government agencies prepare to defend against possible Russian interference in the midterm elections, the Federal Election Commission has a different response: too soon. The four commissioners on Thursday deadlocked, again, on proposals to consider new rules, for example, for foreign-influenced U.S. corporations and for politically active entities that don't disclose their donors. "We have reason to think there are foreign actors who are looking for every single avenue to try and influence our elections," said Commissioner Ellen Weintraub, a Democrat who offered two proposals for new regulations. Both proposals failed on partisan 2-2 votes. The FEC is debating the question in the shadow of several investigations of Russian election interference, which included an alleged \$1.2 million-per-month campaign to place anonymous, socially divisive ads on prominent Internet platforms. Facebook is imposing new policies to eliminate anonymous advertisers. The FEC is developing rules for disclaimer labels on campaign and issue ads that appear online.

**Related Story: [FEC Democrat Pushes for Foreign Campaign Money Rules.](#)*

[Washington Lobbyists Put on Notice Over Foreign Agent Law](#)

The Associated Press

A recent and rare prosecution of a Pakistani man in Maryland under a relatively obscure lobbying law has many in the multimillion dollar world of foreign influence bracing for more. The prosecution of Nisar Ahmed Chaudhry reflects what current and former Justice Department officials say is an aggressive enforcement strategy against unregistered foreign agents that began even before special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation exposed a shadowy world of international influence peddling.... Officials say they're not interpreting any differently the little-known law called the Foreign Agents Registration Act, which requires people to disclose to the

Justice Department when they lobby in the U.S. on behalf of foreign governments or political entities. But they've been taking a more aggressive approach, asking more probing questions of people and firms they suspect need to register, requesting more documents and conducting investigations with an eye toward bringing criminal charges when appropriate.

[Corporate Lobbying Comes at a Price](#)

Salon

AT&T has given companies a lesson on why investors increasingly are seeking information about corporate political spending. For five years, investors have called on AT&T to tell them how much it was spending to lobby politicians at the state and federal levels. AT&T refused. Now, the company is deeply mired in a self-inflicted legal and reputational disaster through the now disclosed \$600,000 in payments to President Donald Trump's personal attorney, Michael Cohen. The leaked information has led to complaints being filed about possible Lobby Disclosure Act violations, the resignation of the head of the AT&T lobby shop and a torrent of negative press. All this leaves the investors who asked AT&T to improve its lobbying disclosure (and were rejected) dismayed that AT&T's lack of transparency, disclosure and oversight contributed to this public relations (and shareholder value) fiasco. Political spending has become more of an issue since the 2010 U.S. Supreme Court's overreaching decision in *Citizens United*, which enabled corporations to spend unlimited sums to influence our elections. Since then, many have pushed the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) to create rules that would require public companies to disclose their political activity.

[Bernie-Trump Legacy: Rejecting Corporate PAC Money](#)

Buzzfeed

They've expressed skepticism about Medicare for All and free college, cut back on talk of DACA and DREAMers, and tiptoed around social issues like transgender rights. But when it comes to campaign finance — and the move to reject corporate PAC money — many leading Democrats in red and purple districts are in step with national figures like Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Cory Booker, and Kirsten Gillibrand. In 2016, for example, just three candidates on the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee's "Red to Blue" list, challengers the party is backing to contest seats in Republican-held districts, said they wouldn't take money from corporate PACs. This election cycle, that's jumped to more than 50%, according to End Citizens United, a group that wants to change current campaign finance rules. For most Democrats in House races, rejecting corporate PAC money isn't much like what Sanders did in 2016, when he essentially eschewed the entire traditional fundraising apparatus in favor of small donors.

[Who's Behind Those Political Ads on Facebook? Now, You Can Find Out](#)

The Washington Post

Facebook and Twitter forged ahead Thursday with new efforts to disclose more information about the political advertisements that appear on their sites, part of a broad campaign to help users better understand why they see the content they do and who's behind it. For both tech companies, the stakes are high ahead of the 2018 midterm election, two years after Russian agents spread propaganda – through ads and other posts – on social media sites in a bid to create social and political unrest in the United States during the 2016 presidential race. Starting Thursday on Facebook, political ads will include a marker at the top indicating who has paid for it. Clicking on the label will bring users to a new repository of all political ads that have run on the site, along with information about the people who saw it, like their age and location.

**Related Story: [Facebook Election Commission Launches New Rules to Govern Election Disclosure.](#)*

**Related Story: [New Organizations Flag Concerns on Facebook's Political-Ad Rules.](#)*

NEW REPORTS

[Trust in Government in the Trump Era](#)

CAP Report

The election and presidency of Donald Trump has upended American politics in numerous ways. For his most ardent supporters, President Trump's efforts to change things in Washington; to deliver nationalist economic policies on trade, jobs, and immigration; and to advance culturally conservative rhetoric and racial appeals are worth the break with past presidential behavior and national unity. For his detractors, the actions of Trump and his administration represent a serious abrogation of presidential norms and mark a dangerous shift away from pluralist democracy and toward more authoritarian nationalism. Many other voters with less intense feelings about Trump are just trying to put the whole spectacle out of their minds and to find some semblance of normalcy in a politically fractured environment.

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