



## DEMOCRACY REFORM TASK FORCE WEEKLY NEWS ROUND UP

June 8, 2018

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### NATIONAL NEWS

#### [Democrats Can't Stop Trump in Congress, But They're Hoping to Sue](#)

**Buzzfeed**

Lawyers representing Democratic members of Congress sparred with the Justice Department in court on Thursday over whether Democrats can move ahead with a constitutional challenge to President Donald Trump's ongoing ties to his business empire. Nearly 200 Democrats in the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives sued Trump last year in federal court in Washington, D.C., accusing him of violating the Constitution's foreign emoluments clause. A judge heard arguments on Thursday on a key threshold question: whether members of Congress have standing to sue the president at all.

#### [Trump's Spent Far More Going to Mar-a-Lago Than Mueller Probe](#)

**The Washington Post**

President Trump's frustration with the ongoing investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election and any coordination with his campaign was expressed in dollar terms Friday morning. Trump is referring to an Associated Press report citing data recently submitted to the Justice Department by special counsel Robert S. Mueller III's team. Through the end of March, the price tag for Mueller's efforts has been about \$16.7 million. From October to March, the probe — which the Associated Press did not refer to as “the Russia Hoax Investigation” — cost about \$1.7 million each month. In the grand scheme of government spending, \$16.7 million is ... not a lot. The federal government is expected to spend about \$4.1 trillion in fiscal 2018. To put it into more tangible terms, spending \$16.7 million of \$4.1 trillion is like making \$50,000 a year and spending 20 cents

## [Mueller Accuses Manafort of Witness Tampering](#)

### **CNN**

The Special Counsel's Office has accused former Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort of attempting to get witnesses to lie for him in court, and they've asked the judge to send him to jail as he awaits his trial, according to a filing in DC District Court Monday night. One of the witnesses told investigators recently that Manafort wanted them to commit perjury about a lobbying effort they worked on for him in the US, the filing said. Manafort is currently out on house arrest and a \$10 million unsecured bail. He awaits a trial in Virginia that is scheduled for late July and a trial in DC scheduled to begin in September. He has pleaded not guilty to charges related to his failure to disclose his US lobbying work for a foreign government and to bank fraud and other financial crimes. Tampering with a witness is a crime in itself -- and it's one Manafort has not yet been charged with.

## [Ivanka Was in Contact with a Russian Who Offered a Trump-Putin Meeting](#)

### **Buzzfeed**

Amid intense scrutiny of contacts between Donald Trump's inner circle and representatives of Vladimir Putin, Ivanka Trump's name has barely come up. But during the campaign, she connected her father's personal lawyer with a Russian athlete who offered to introduce Donald Trump to Putin to facilitate a 100-story Trump tower in Moscow, according to emails reviewed by BuzzFeed News and four sources with knowledge of the matter. There is no evidence that Ivanka Trump's contact with the athlete — the former Olympic weightlifter Dmitry Klokov — was illegal or that it had anything to do with the election. Nor is it clear that Klokov could even have introduced Trump to the Russian president. But congressional investigators have reviewed emails and questioned witnesses about the interaction, according to two of the sources, and so has special counsel Robert Mueller's team, according to the other two.

## [Coal Industry Documents Show Extent of Effort to Influence Trump](#)

### **USA Today**

Bob Murray, CEO of Ohio-based Murray Energy, sent the Trump administration drafts of executive orders for withdrawing from the Paris climate accord, according to documents obtained by *E&E News*. All the president had to do was sign them. The orders also would have rolled back coal regulations established under the Obama administration that Murray thought were a burden to his industry, *E&E News* reported. There's no indication President Trump signed the orders and industry often gets involved with helping lawmakers and administrations write policy, but the documents released Wednesday reveal the extent of the energy CEO's efforts to get rid of environmental regulations on his industry.

## [Sheldon Adelson: The Casino Mogul Driving Trump's Middle East Policy](#)

### **The Guardian**

Adelson has put some of that money toward pushing an array of political interests ranging from protecting his business from online gambling to opposition to marijuana legalisation.

But nothing aligns more closely with his world view than the intertwining of the Republican party and Israel. Adelson's considerable support for Republicans is in no small part motivated by what he regards as their more reliable support for the policies of Benjamin Netanyahu, which appear intent on preventing the creation of an independent Palestinian state. Adelson gave \$82m toward Trump's and other Republican campaigns during the 2016 election cycle – more than three times the next largest individual donor, according to Open Secrets.

## [Original Donald Trump Super PAC Announced Curious Reimbursement](#)

### **The Daily Beast**

About two weeks after super PAC Make America Great Again was formed in June 2015, it got its biggest cash infusion of the cycle: a cool million from Vegas casino magnate Phil Ruffin. But by October, scrutiny of the PAC proved too much to bear. Trump was running on a platform that explicitly eschewed big-money backers, and the campaign was having trouble explaining its many links to the super PAC's donors (including Jared Kushner's mother) and executives (the group was run by a Trump campaign vendor). Finding itself under a microscope and publicly shunned by the Trump campaign, Make America Great Again ceased operations less than six months later, with more than \$157,000 still in the bank, according to Federal Election Commission filings. But when the group filed its first FEC report of 2016, it reported a negative cash balance of about \$3,500. The FEC has tried ever since to get the group to say what it did with the \$160,000 difference.

## [Cozy Land Deals Meant Big Money for Trump Family and Friends](#)

### **USA Today**

The purchase of three properties by President Trump's son-in-law on the banks of a toxic Brooklyn canal triggered a series of unusual real estate deals and a windfall profit from transactions financed by a bank tied to the Trump family. The property transactions totaling more than \$150 million began in late 2014 and early 2015 and included sales prices well above the assessed value of the parcels, as well as high-risk loans that experts said raise red flags. At the center of each deal is either Jared Kushner or Michael Cohen, whose business dealings have attracted close scrutiny from prosecutors and regulators since Trump's election.

The transactions were financed through Signature Bank, one of three banks whose ties to Kushner have been widely reported to be under review by New York banking regulators. The bank's board members have included Ivanka Trump and former Republican U.S. senator Al D'Amato, a dealmaker and power broker in New York business and politics.

## [The Chemical Industry Scores a Big Win at the E.P.A](#)

### **The New York Times**

The Trump administration, after heavy lobbying by the chemical industry, is scaling back the way the federal government determines health and safety risks associated with the most dangerous chemicals on the market. Under a law passed by Congress during the final year of the Obama administration, the E.P.A. was required for the first time to evaluate hundreds of potentially toxic chemicals and determine if they should face new restrictions, or even be removed from the market. The chemicals include many in everyday use, such as dry-cleaning solvents, paint strippers and substances used in health and beauty products like shampoos and cosmetics. But as it moves forward reviewing the first batch of 10 chemicals, the E.P.A. has in most cases decided to exclude from its calculations any potential exposure caused by the substances' presence in the air, the ground or water.

*\*Related Story: [Lobbyist Whose Wife Rented Condo to Pruitt Failed to Disclose Lobbying.](#)*

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*\*Related Op-Ed: [Corruption Hits the Small Time.](#)*

## [Mulvaney Sides with Payday Lenders Asking Court to Block Restrictions](#)

### **The New York Times**

Payday lenders fought, and lost, a battle to block new federal rules curbing short-term loans that critics say can trap people in cycles of debt. Now, with the restrictions scheduled to take effect next year, the lenders have moved their fight to the courtroom, and have gained a powerful ally: the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, which wrote the rules the industry is seeking to overturn. In a joint motion filed late last week in federal court in Austin, Tex., Mick Mulvaney, the bureau's acting director, sided with two industry trade groups suing the agency. The bureau asked a judge to delay the rules until after the industry groups' lawsuit is resolved, which may take years. By then, the entire issue could be moot: Mr. Mulvaney has said he intends for the bureau to reconsider, and perhaps repeal, the rules. To do that, the agency has to follow a formal administrative process, which it has said it plans to begin by February.

## [Ex-Chemical Industry Lawyer to Lead Superfund Task Force](#)

### **The Associated Press**

A lawyer tapped to lead a task force at the Environmental Protection Agency overseeing cleanups at the nation's most polluted places worked until recently for a top chemical and plastics manufacturer with a troubled legacy of creating some of those toxic sites. Steven D. Cook has been named as the new chair of the Superfund Task Force, which EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt created last year to revamp how the agency oversees cleanups at the more than 1,300 toxic sites. Before beginning work in February as deputy assistant administrator for EPA's Office of Land and Emergency Management, Cook served more than 20 years as in-house corporate counsel for LyondellBasell Industries — one of the world's largest plastics, chemicals and refining companies. EPA records show that LyondellBasell and its subsidiaries are listed as being potentially responsible for at least three dozen Superfund polluted sites. An analysis by The Associated Press shows that nearly half the political appointees hired at EPA under President Donald Trump have industry ties.

## [Seven Trump Cabinet Members Continue Spending Campaign Funds](#)

### **MapLight**

Seven current or former members of President Donald Trump's Cabinet have spent almost \$450,000 in political campaign funds since being confirmed by the U.S. Senate. A MapLight analysis found that about \$175,200 has been spent by Cabinet members for bills that include meals, airfare, cell phones, storage units, credit cards, and political software consulting. The Trump Cabinet members are among more than five dozen former or retiring lawmakers who stand to gain from a lack of rules governing the use of old congressional campaign funds. A proposal being considered by the FEC would require the commission to examine old campaign funds, but it wouldn't begin to take effect until the next decade, at earliest.

## [Embattled Chinese Telecom Giant ZTE Hired Trump Campaign Veteran](#)

### **The Daily Beast**

A day after President Donald Trump announced he would consider easing penalties against a controversial Chinese electronics company, that company enlisted a Trump campaign veteran to make its case in Washington. ZTE Corporation struck a contract with D.C. lobbying and public relations powerhouse Mercury Public Affairs on May 14, a day after Trump tweeted that he would consider lifting the penalties that had been imposed on the company as punishment for its violation of sanctions against Iran and North Korea. The Mercury consultant working on the account is Bryan Lanza, a veteran of the Trump 2016 presidential campaign. Less than two weeks after Lanza's work began, the Trump administration announced that it had reached a tentative deal to ease those penalties, a move criticized by lawmakers of both parties.

*\*Related Story: [ZTE of China to Pay \\$1 Billion Fine in Deal to End U.S. Sanctions.](#)*

## [GOP Staffers Who Wrote the Tax Bill Cash in with Lobbying Gigs](#)

### **POLITICO**

Top-level GOP aides who helped write the new tax law are now leaving the Hill in droves to cash in as lobbyists on K Street and other marquee private-sector destinations. Powerhouse accounting firm PwC landed one of the biggest prizes, announcing Monday that Mark Prater, the Senate Finance Committee's longtime GOP chief tax counsel, is the new managing director of its tax policy services group. Others who have made the switch include a top aide to Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), Brendan Dunn, who joined Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld in May as a partner in its public law and policy practice.

*\*Related Story: [Shahira Knight Leaving White House for Clearing House Banking Group.](#)*

## [Facebook Reveals Democrats and Republicans Bought Secretive Ads](#)

### **The Huffington Post**

The Facebook page for Budgeting California had only five visible posts about innocuous issues like gas prices, property taxes and a personal finance workshop hosted by the Los Angeles Rams before Tuesday — when California holds its first-round primary elections. But the page had purchased dozens of ads that used conservative messaging to oppose Shawn Nelson and Bob Huff, two Republicans running in the state's 39th Congressional District. On Election Day, a public post appeared attacking Nelson. The creators of Budgeting California are two super PACs affiliated with the Democratic Party. This is not a new practice. Campaigns and PACs on both sides of the partisan divide have been setting up Facebook pages and websites under names not their own for at least the past 10 years. What's changed is that it has become much easier to find these pages and identify who is behind them since Facebook set up a database on May 24 to disclose political ads running on its platform.

*\*Related Story: [Google Will Pause Election Ads in Washington in Response to New Law.](#)*

*\*Related Story: [Facebook Gave Data Access to Chinese Firm Flagged by U.S. Intelligence.](#)*

## [Trump Lawyer Payments Fuel AT&T Push Know About Political Spending](#)

### **Dallas News**

Long before Dallas-based AT&T found itself in the crosshairs for hiring President Donald Trump's personal attorney Michael Cohen, some of the telecom giant's shareholders sent up a warning: Secrecy surrounding how it spends money in Washington could put the company's reputation at risk. For five years, a group of shareholders has pushed AT&T to disclose how much it funds industry groups and tax-exempt organizations that engage in political activities. AT&T is not unique. Increasingly, companies are facing pressure from shareholders to reveal how they spend money to influence legislation in Washington. But those concerns took on new

relevancy at AT&T last month, when it became public that the company paid \$600,000 to Cohen to advise on various matters, including its pending merger with Time Warner.

## [Campaign Cash from Far-Away Donors Flood Competitive Primaries](#)

**CNBC**

With congressional primaries wrapped up in another eight states, donors who have been waiting to make campaign contributions can now begin placing bets on their party's nominees. Much of the money so far has come from large contributions from long-distance donors who are hoping to shape the outcome of the midterm election. In this year's 435 House races, nearly three-quarters of direct contributions larger than \$200 so far have come from donors outside the candidate's district, according to an analysis by the Center for Responsive Politics. The bulk of that out-of-district money is flowing to a relatively small number of competitive races, including dozens of open seats where incumbents have retired or resigned.

## [The Rise of the Congressional Reformers Caucus](#)

**The Daily Beast**

... In what's considered a big breakthrough, 26 current members—evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats—are forming a Congressional Reformers Caucus. Their first meeting will be Friday, June 8 in the House Longworth Building. This newly created caucus emerges against a backdrop of a record number of retirements and widespread frustration with the job.... The co-founders of the Congressional Reformers Caucus, Tea Party Republican Ken Buck from Colorado, and tough-on-crime Democrat Kathleen Rice from Long Island, New York, are both former prosecutors who share frustration over the breakdown in the legislative process. First elected in 2014, they are ideological opposites. Buck has an AR-15 mounted in a locked cabinet on his office wall while Rice supports gun control.... Among the ideas the caucus is exploring are a ban on fundraising while the House is in session, an "Honest Ads" act that would have paid political ads on the Internet carry a disclaimer on who takes responsibility, similar to those on television ads, and more disclosure around leadership PACs that blur the line between official and personal use.

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### IN THE STATES

## [The Ins and Outs of Public Campaign Financing in Connecticut](#)

**Hartford Courant**

The head of the agency in charge of Connecticut's clean-elections program predicted that a record 300 candidates — from the governor's race on down to legislative contests — could

participate this year. Michael Brandi, executive director of the State Elections Enforcement Commission (SEEC), said agency staff have been working nights and weekends to handle the deluge of applications. “These are the most applications we’ve received in the history of the program,” Brandi said. “We’re getting absolutely bombarded.”

## [Organizations Collecting Signatures to Place Reform Bill on Nov. Ballot](#)

### **Common Cause**

A coalition of democracy reform and social justice-oriented community organizations called The Albuquerque Democracy Project have initiated a petition drive in Albuquerque to amend the city’s charter, modernize the city’s public finance system, and significantly expand democratic participation.... If successful in November, the charter amendment will make Albuquerque the second city in the country to implement an innovative program called “Democracy Dollars,” in which city residents will be mailed \$25.00 coupons to contribute to qualified city candidates of their choosing. The voices of individual voters will be intensified under this new system.

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## KEY OPINION

## [Grifters Gonna Grift](#)

### **The New York Times (Editorial Board)**

This is shaping up to be another red-letter week for Draining the Swamp. On Monday, Paul Manafort, President Trump’s former campaign chairman, splashed back into the news when members of the special counsel Robert Mueller’s team accused him in court papers of witness tampering. Swamp-watchers will recall that Mr. Manafort is facing a smorgasbord of charges related to tax, lobbying and money-laundering violations. Prosecutors now say that he has been using his free time while awaiting trial to try to contact some former European business associates in order to coach them into lying about his work on behalf of pro-Russia political interests in Ukraine. Mr. Manafort’s secret lobbying scheme is alleged to have been impressively elaborate — as, also, efforts to cover it up. But the straightforward phrase that leaps out from this latest court filing comes from a witness telling the F.B.I. that Mr. Manafort had tried to “suborn perjury.” Such an effort would qualify as a definite legal no-no. Meanwhile, Scott Pruitt, head of the Environmental Protection Agency, has once again burnished his reputation as the Trump administration’s biggest grifter. On Monday, Democrats on the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee asked the committee’s chairman, Representative Trey Gowdy, to subpoena the E.P.A. for documents relating to Mr. Pruitt’s “multiple abuses of authority in using agency staff for his own personal purposes.”

## [Facebook and Google Are Not Above Election-Ad Laws](#)

### **The Seattle Times (Editorial)**

When it comes to protecting the integrity of our elections, everyone has an equal obligation to follow the law. That includes online behemoths such as Google and Facebook, which are becoming increasingly big players in political advertising, both nationally and in Washington state. By accepting these political-campaign dollars, the companies also are accepting the responsibility to keep detailed records of who is using their online platforms to influence millions of voters. These transparency requirements, which Washington state voters approved by citizen initiative in 1972, are the same ones regularly followed by local TV stations, newspapers and print shops that accept money in exchange for airing or printing political ads. Yet the evidence suggests Google and Facebook have repeatedly failed to abide by the same rules. In separate lawsuits filed against the two tech giants this week, Washington state AG Bob Ferguson asserts the companies failed to record the names and addresses of people buying political advertising, along with how much the ads cost and how they were paid for.

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## NEW REPORTS

## [Confronting the Cost of Trump's Corruption to American Families](#)

### **Center for American Progress**

In the Trump administration, corruption is not just accepted, it is encouraged. Trump has created a culture of corruption, where it's expected that those with public power will wield it for private gain. And this culture has, in turn, attracted those who are themselves corrupt and seeking to profit from this opportunity. This culture of corruption has wide-ranging effects. When the interests of the politically connected are put first, it's at the expense of people without the means to pay for lobbyists in Washington. When the interests of foreign governments are put first, it's at the expense of America's safety. And when the priorities of elected leaders are shaped only by those with money or power, then the needs of the American people remain unmet. A culture of corruption also weakens society as a whole. It leads to a perverse set of incentives, where those who are corrupt advance, while those who are honest are forced out of positions of power. It incentivizes incompetence among public officials because people are judged not by their ability to do their job, but rather on their ability to conceal or participate in unethical, and even illegal, behavior. Moreover, it weakens the societal trust that is the cornerstone of a robust economy and civil society.

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