



DEMOCRACY REFORM TASK FORCE WEEKLY NEWS ROUND UP

September 21, 2018

NATIONAL NEWS

[The Plot to Subvert an Election](#)

The New York Times

For two years, Americans have tried to absorb the details of the 2016 attack — hacked emails, social media fraud, suspected spies — and President Trump’s claims that it’s all a hoax.... For many Americans, the Trump-Russia story as it has been voluminously reported over the past two years is a confusing tangle of unfamiliar names and cyberjargon, further obscured by the shout-fest of partisan politics. What Robert S. Mueller III, the special counsel in charge of the investigation, may know or may yet discover is still uncertain. President Trump’s Twitter outbursts that it is all a “hoax” and a “witch hunt,” in the face of a mountain of evidence to the contrary, have taken a toll on public comprehension. But to travel back to 2016 and trace the major plotlines of the Russian attack is to underscore what we now know with certainty: The Russians carried out a landmark intervention that will be examined for decades to come. Acting on the personal animus of Mr. Putin, public and private instruments of Russian power moved with daring and skill to harness the currents of American politics. Well-connected Russians worked aggressively to recruit or influence people inside the Trump campaign.

[Legal Experts Urge Release of Watergate Report to Offer Mueller Guide](#)

The New York Times

A question has loomed over Washington: What will the special counsel, Robert S. Mueller III, do when he wraps up his investigation into whether the Trump campaign conspired with Russia and whether President Trump obstructed justice? The leading theory is that Mr. Mueller will write a report for his supervisor at the Justice Department. That could lead to a new fight: Mr. Trump’s lawyer, Rudolph W. Giuliani, has suggested that the White House may then invoke executive privilege and order the Justice Department to keep portions of such a report confidential from Congress. But there is historical precedent for another model. Echoing a move by the Watergate prosecutor in March 1974, the grand jury with which Mr. Mueller has been working could try to

send a report about the evidence it has gathered directly to the House Judiciary Committee. And on Friday, seeking to draw more attention to that option, three prominent legal analysts asked a court to lift a veil of secrecy that has long kept that Watergate-era report hidden. Specifically, the petition asks a judge to unseal a report that the Watergate prosecutor used to send Congress the evidence he had gathered about President Nixon.

[Manafort Plea Deal Casts New Scrutiny on Lobbyists He Recruited](#)

The New York Times

This year, Mr. Mueller’s team referred cases involving possible illegal Ukrainian lobbying by Podesta, Mercury and the law firm Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom — all of which Mr. Manafort had recruited to do work related to Ukraine — to federal prosecutors in New York. And the evidence that Mr. Mueller’s prosecutors publicly unveiled on Friday could help their New York colleagues build the cases against the firms, including the correspondence that questioned the independence of the European Center. The firms were not named in the court filings, but they do not dispute that prosecutors are referring to them. The new evidence was included in updated charges filed against Mr. Manafort in connection with his guilty plea for conspiring to obstruct justice and to violate tax, banking and lobbying laws. As part of the plea deal, Mr. Manafort agreed to cooperate with prosecutors on investigations into “any and all matters” they deemed relevant, including providing testimony in Washington and elsewhere.

**Related Story: [How a Ukrainian Hairdresser Became a Front for Paul Manafort.](#)*

[Trump Asks About Site of His Golf Club During Florence Briefing](#)

The Daily Beast

While President Trump was briefed on the deadly, devastating aftermath of Hurricane Florence, he took a moment to ask an official about the condition of one particular lake—where he has a golf course nestled on the shore—according to a tweet from *Los Angeles Times* editor Jackie Calmes. After asking a Duke Energy representative about Lake Norman, and hearing that it was fine, Trump responded: “I love that area. I can’t tell you why, but I love that area.” He neglected to mention that Trump National Golf Club is on its shores.

[Major Republican Fundraisers Funnel Money to Trump's Hotel](#)

ThinkProgress

Twice in the past week, major Republican fundraisers have held their events at the Trump Hotel in Washington, D.C. — putting money in the president’s pocket as he provides access to Republican leaders and helps the party raise money for its candidates. On Monday night, President Trump attended a fundraiser dinner held by the National Republican Senate Committee (NRSC) at the Trump Hotel. The closed-door event with supporters was just the latest investment

the NRSC has made in the Trump-owned venue. As journalist Zach Everson noted, the NRSC has spent more than \$20,000 at the Trump Hotel since Trump was elected (not counting Monday's dinner). McClatchy White House Correspondent Antia Kumar notes that Trump has repeatedly denied media access to these fundraising events.

[Chao Government Flights Cost \\$94K](#)

POLITICO

Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao flew on Federal Aviation Administration planes rather than commercial flights on seven occasions between January and August 2017, newly released records show — including one flight to and around Europe that cost taxpayers an estimated \$68,892 for her and five staffers. All told, Chao's flights on the FAA planes cost an estimated \$93,977.84, the records show. She appears to have halted the practice just as one of her fellow Cabinet members, then-Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price, was facing increasing scrutiny over his use of private and military flights. Price resigned in September 2017 after POLITICO raised questions about the flight expenses, which totaled about \$1.2 million. The newly released records do not indicate that anyone has raised red flags over Chao's use of the FAA aircraft — two Cessna Citations and one Gulfstream IV business jet — which come with rules requiring government officials to justify the flights as cost-effective. But the disclosures come amid continuing questions surrounding the travel costs of senior Trump administration officials, most recently an investigation of Federal Emergency Management Agency chief Brock Long's use of official cars.

[Brock Long's Woes Mount as House GOP Launches Travel Inquiry](#)

The New York Times

House Republicans will investigate reports that Brock Long, the administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, repeatedly misused government vehicles to commute from Washington to North Carolina, where his family resides. Representative Trey Gowdy, Republican of South Carolina and the chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, wrote to Mr. Long on Monday requesting documentation and other information related to his use of government vehicles and about the agency personnel who may have accompanied him on the trips. Mr. Gowdy learned of the potential misuse last week from news reports, but he delayed starting an inquiry as FEMA girded for what was then Hurricane Florence, which was bearing down on the Carolina coast. For Mr. Long, who is already under investigation by the Department of Homeland Security's inspector general, news of another federal investigation will only complicate an already precarious balancing act as he marshals an ongoing rescue effort and what will be a sprawling recovery program, even as he tries to convince investigators he did not knowingly violate agency rules.

[Ben Carson's HUD: Political Loyalty Required, No Experience Necessary](#)

The Washington Post

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development awarded promotions and pay increases to five political operatives with no housing policy experience within their first months on the job, demonstrating what government watchdogs and career staff describe as a premium put on loyalty over expertise. The raises, documented in a Washington Post analysis of HUD political hires, resulted in annual salaries between \$98,000 and \$155,000 for the five appointees, all of whom had worked on Donald Trump's or Ben Carson's presidential campaigns. Three of them did not list bachelor's degrees on their résumés. The political hires were among at least 24 people without evident housing policy experience who were appointed to the best-paying political positions at HUD, an agency charged with serving the poorest Americans. They account for a third of the 70 HUD appointees at the upper ranks of the federal government, with salaries above \$94,000, according to the Post review of agency records.

[Turnberry Lobbyist Joins Trump Administration](#)

POLITICO

Mike Rubino, a former staffer for President Donald Trump's presidential campaign in 2016 who went on to lobby for a firm co-founded by Corey Lewandowski after the election, is joining the administration. He's joined the Department of Health and Human Service intergovernmental and external affairs office as a senior adviser, according to the agency. The department didn't reference Rubino's lobbying work in a tweet announcing his hire, stating only that he was joining "from the private sector, where he worked in public policy, communications, and crisis management." ... Rubino worked as an adviser to Trump's campaign in Virginia in 2016. After the election, he joined Avenue Strategies, a lobbying firm started by Lewandowski and another Trump campaign veteran, Barry Bennett. When Lewandowski quit Avenue last year amid questions about cashing in on his access to Trump, Rubino left too and started a new lobbying firm with another Avenue veteran, Jason Osborne. The new firm, Turnberry Solutions, was housed in a Capitol Hill rowhouse that Lewandowski also lived and worked in.

[Supreme Court Orders Disclosure for Dark Money](#)

NPR

The Supreme Court on Tuesday insisted that many donations to predominantly conservative political nonprofit groups — what's often called dark money — be disclosed, seven weeks ahead of the 2018 midterm elections. The ruling closes, at least for now, a loophole that has allowed wealthy donors to finance aggressive ads while staying anonymous. Crafted by the Federal Election Commission nearly 40 years ago, the loophole flourished after the 2010 Citizens United ruling. The court set aside an order issued by Chief Justice John Roberts on Saturday. The social welfare group Crossroads GPS, a defendant in the lawsuit, had fought to stall disclosure

while it prepares to appeal. It failed in the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals and then appealed to the Supreme Court. The disclosure requirement is expected to apply to explicitly political ads by nonprofit groups for the remaining weeks of the campaign season.

[FEC Could Ban Congress from Using Leadership PACs for Personal Use](#)

McClatchy

The Federal Election Commission is for the first time seriously considering banning members of Congress from using any political donations for personal use. Its action was spurred by a report from watchdog groups that found “often under the guise of fundraising activity, officeholders and candidates overwhelmingly use leadership PAC money to pay for, among other things, five-star luxury resort stays, expensive dinners, trips to theme parks, golf outings, tickets to Broadway shows and sporting events, and international travel.” ... If the FEC eventually approves the ban rule, it would treat leadership PAC spending as similar to campaign account spending, meaning much more scrutiny of leadership PAC expenses in the future.

[Campaign Violations? The FEC Doesn't Seem to Care](#)

Bloomberg (Editorial)

The Federal Election Commission would prefer not to know. On a party-line vote, the FEC has voted not to pursue enforcement action against the campaign of President Donald Trump for soliciting foreign contributions in the summer of 2016. In a separate case, also released this month, the FEC opted not to pursue charges that former Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort had illegally solicited campaign money for a super PAC that backed Trump. That vote was also on a party line, with two Republican commissioners pitted against one Democrat and a Democratic-leaning independent.... The FEC’s general counsel found reason to believe that the Trump campaign, but not Trump himself, had violated the law.... If Democrats take control of one or both sides of Congress in November, they should commence hearings into the FEC and campaign law, with the goal of devising a fix that both parties can live with. If a bipartisan solution proves impossible — and it well may — then Congress should consider a more drastic approach: winding down the FEC and transferring its functions to the Department of Justice.

[Foreign Lobbying Overhaul Loses Steam in Congress](#)

POLITICO

Nearly a year later, amid partisan clashes and pushback from foreign-owned companies, the push to strengthen the Foreign Agents Registration Act appears to be going nowhere fast... Manafort, President Donald Trump’s former campaign manager, pleaded guilty on Friday to charges including failing to register with the Justice Department for his work in the U.S. on behalf of Ukraine’s former president. Special counsel Robert Mueller’s prosecution of Manafort has drawn attention to the law he admitted to breaking, which was first passed in 1938 to combat

Nazi propaganda efforts. Johnson's bill, which would toughen enforcement by giving the Justice Department more power to go after people who fail to register, came amid heightened interest in cracking down on foreign lobbyists. An identical bill was introduced in the Senate last October, and this summer, Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass). proposed stopping Americans from lobbying on behalf of foreign governments and companies.

[Congress Passes Bill to Require Electronic Senate Campaign Filings](#)

The Hill

Congress passed a bill Thursday that would require senators to file campaign finance reports electronically through the Federal Election Commission (FEC). The language was included in a broader appropriations bill sent to the White House for President Trump's signature. If the bill is signed, the Senate would finally be subject to the same electronic filing (e-filing) requirements that the House has had since 1995. The FEC has been pushing for Senate e-filing partly because of potential savings. The current paper-based filing system means that the FEC can spend up to 10 days on a lengthy process of integrating filings into their public database.

[Indicted Congressman Collins Reverses Himself, Will Remain on Ballot](#)

The Washington Post

Rep. Chris Collins (R-N.Y.), under federal indictment in connection with insider trading and lying to investigators, will remain on the ballot in November, his attorney said Monday, reversing Collins's initial decision to suspend his campaign for reelection. That is a scenario that Republican Party officials had hoped to avoid. While New York's 27th Congressional District is heavily Republican, Democrats believe that with Collins on the ballot, they have an outside chance of claiming the seat in November as they fight to retake the House majority. For weeks, state Republican officials explored finding a way for Collins to vacate the general election ballot and replace him with an untainted GOP candidate, but under New York state law there are scant options for a primary winner to spurn his party's nomination. Short of death or moving out of state, Collins would have had to accept the nomination for another state office.

[Utah Group Files Complaint Against Mia Love Over Fund-Raising](#)

The New York Times

A progressive group in Utah that advocates government transparency and accountability filed a federal complaint against Representative Mia Love, a Republican, on Tuesday over alleged campaign finance violations, escalating the liberal fight against the vulnerable incumbent just seven weeks before November's midterm elections. Alliance for a Better Utah, a progressive nonprofit, filed the complaint with the Federal Election Commission and sent a detailed letter to the commission's general counsel and the chief of the public integrity section at the Department of Justice's criminal division. The letter, which comes after the commission forced Ms. Love to

acknowledge that some of her primary funds had been improperly raised, argues that Ms. Love's "actions are a betrayal of the public trust and of Utah voters," and "should be subject to criminal penalties." In a statement, Love's campaign called complaint a political ploy.

IN THE STATES

[Spanberger Sets Sights on Campaign Finance Reform If Elected](#)

WCVE-FM

Abigail Spanberger, the Democratic candidate for Virginia's seventh congressional district, says she hopes to make campaign finance reform and good governance top priorities if she's elected to Congress. Spanberger was recently the target of an attack ad funded by a conservative PAC tied to Speaker Paul Ryan. She's pledged not to take money from corporate PACs. Spanberger says if elected, she would strengthen disclosure of outside political spending, support a Constitutional amendment to overturn Citizens United and require transparency on social media ads. "It doesn't matter whether or not someone takes a particular vote because of a particular dollar donation and I think in most cases that's not what's happening, but when you trend in a way where there is so much money influencing things, it erodes the trust of people so significantly." At a town hall at Henrico's Gayton Library on Tuesday, Spanberger expressed her support for the No Budget, No Pay Act and non-partisan redistricting. She also pledged to introduce legislation to make voter registration automatic.

[Record Number of Candidates Receive Public Financing](#)

Republican American (Connecticut)

A record number of candidates have qualified for public financing for the 2018 state elections following the approvals of 15 more campaign grants on Wednesday. The State Election Enforcement Commission has now approved funding for 300 candidates for statewide offices and the General Assembly, and the commission is scheduled to consider additional applications next Wednesday. The number of candidates approved through Wednesday eclipsed the old record of 292 the Citizens' Election Program set in 2014 the last time all six statewide offices and the 187 seats of the state legislature were up for election, said Michael Brandi, the executive director of the SEEC. In addition, he said a record 17 candidates for statewide offices qualified for public financing between the Aug. 14 primary contests and the general election.

[Fans of Ranked Voting See an Opportunity in Massachusetts](#)

The New York Times

Nearly two weeks after voters went to the polls, Lori Trahan emerged Monday as the official winner of a 10-person Democratic primary for the congressional seat based in Lowell, Mass., held for a decade by Representative Niki Tsongas, who is retiring. The sprawling district, north of Boston, votes reliably Democratic and is expected to stay in the party's hands in November. What makes the race interesting is its potential for changing the way Massachusetts votes in future elections. After a recount of votes was finished Monday, Ms. Trahan, a former congressional aide and now a business consultant, was declared the winner — with less than 21% of the vote, according to the secretary of state. That slim margin could strengthen calls for Massachusetts or some of its municipalities to convert to a system known as ranked choice voting, which ensures that the eventual winner earns a majority of votes. Advocates say this system is more democratic than a plurality, which often doesn't reflect the will of most voters.

KEY OPINION

[John Kerry on Trump's 'Disarray' and How to Fix Our Broken Politics](#)

The Los Angeles Times (Interview Transcript)

Our democracy is imperiled, No. 1, by too much money in American politics. No. 2, we don't have a genuine democratic national election for our Congress because of gerrymandering. You have to end the gerrymandering. So you have a legitimate election of Congress. And No. 3, it's not the rules of the Senate that changed, folks; what has changed are the people. If we have a democracy in which people can raise their right hand, take an oath of office to uphold the Constitution, uphold and protect the institutions of our country, and then they turn around and they show that they are more indebted and more beholden to power, to a president and party, we can't make our democracy work. It's shameful what they are doing in Washington today. It's just shameful.... And that's the money in politics. The American people overwhelmingly would have supported doing something, but a few companies spending a lot of money and targeting it can scare the hell out of people. So that's why we have to fight back.

[Voting at Home Will Help Save Our Democracy](#)

The New York Times (Op-Ed by Phil Keisling and Sam Reed)

The single best way to increase voter turnout? Abolish the polling place. A century ago, the direct election of senators sounded audacious, too. But in six states, it's already true that more than 12 million voters don't need to traipse to polling places on Election Day or apply for absentee ballots. The U.S. Postal Service delivers our ballots automatically, several weeks before each election. Voters can mail their marked ballots — sometimes even postage paid — or take them to one of hundreds of official ballot collection sites. Since most voters choose the latter option, vote-at-home is a more accurate label than vote-by-mail. At many locations, voters can also receive

replacement ballots, update their voter registration and get language or other assistance. For those so inclined, some sites still have voting booths. Oregon rolled out its system in 1998 after voters overwhelmingly approved a ballot measure. Washington finished its county-by-county approach in 2012, while Colorado's first vote-at-home election took place in 2014. Voters today also enjoy this system in 27 of Utah's 29 counties and more than 40 counties in North Dakota, Nebraska and California.... Vote-at-home shines even brighter in lower-turnout midterm and primary elections. Both Oregon and Colorado exceeded 70% turnout in 2014 among registered voters, compared with the national average of 48%.

NEW POLLING

[Public Doubts GOP Can Combat Corruption, Not Convinced Dems Can](#)

McClatchy

Voters are increasingly skeptical that Republicans can reduce corruption in government — but many of them still aren't sure Democrats could do any better. That's the conclusion of a new round of polling released Tuesday from Navigator, a group of Democratic pollsters trying to help their party devise the most politically effective messages for 2018. Its new survey found that only 26 percent of registered voters nationwide thought Republicans were better suited than Democrats to reduce corruption in government, compared to 37 percent who said Democrats would be more effective at it. Another 37 percent of respondents said they didn't know enough to have an opinion. That's a precipitous decline for the GOP in just three months: In June, voters thought Republicans would do a better job combating corruption than Democrats.

[40 Percent of Americans Think Elections Aren't Fair](#)

NPR

In a sign that America's two centuries-old democracy is under strain, nearly 2 in 5 American voters do not believe elections are fair, according to a new NPR/Marist poll. Nearly half of respondents lack faith that votes will be counted accurately in the upcoming midterm elections. Race, gender and partisan identity are all a factor for those who question the cornerstone of the democratic system. Nonwhite voters, women and Democrats all report substantially greater doubts about the fairness of elections compared to Republicans, 91 percent of whom believe elections are fair. Overall, 47 percent of all poll respondents said they think it is either likely or very likely that not all votes will actually be counted in November. And that was driven by the almost 60 percent of non-white voters who think there will incorrect tabulation.

NEW REPORTS

[Lessons from Watergate: Preparing for Post-Trump Reforms](#)

Center for American Progress

Many commentators have compared the Trump administration to the ill-fated presidency of Richard Nixon. The similarities are striking: a willingness to tap into the darker currents of the American political climate, a disregard for the rule of law, and an overriding concern with settling political scores and damaging perceived enemies.... Given these parallels, it is instructive to look at the reforms of the post-Watergate era when considering lessons for policymaking in a post-Trump world.... This report details some of the most significant post-Watergate reforms, providing an example for policymakers in the post-Trump era. Like their post-Watergate predecessors, policymakers must be ready to seize the opportunity to advocate for bold responses that do not just restore the prior status quo but also make fundamental positive changes. In the absence of those changes, the country risks recurrences of this kind of administration, where a corrupt demagoguing president rigs the system for himself and his friends while seeking to misuse government in order to maintain power.

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