



DEMOCRACY REFORM TASK FORCE WEEKLY NEWS ROUND UP

October 13, 2018

NATIONAL NEWS

[House Democratic Challengers Demand Campaign-Finance Reforms](#)

The American Prospect

In an unprecedented letter sent to all House members, 107 House Democratic challengers called for sweeping reforms to be the first item of business taken up in the new Congress next January. The House challengers wrote, “We hear day in and day out that special interests are drowning out the voices of everyday citizens—to the point where many Americans no longer believe their votes even count.” Among the reforms the challengers called for in their letter were “limiting the influence of big donors on campaigns, quashing the political influence, real or perceived, special interests currently have in our government and providing incentives for donors to make small contributions to federal candidates.” The deep public concerns about a rigged system in Washington are setting the stage for achieving fundamental reforms in the next few years. These opportunities do not come along very often.

[Nikki Haley’s Private Plane Flights Raise Ethics Questions](#)

McClatchy

A Washington, D.C. watchdog group wants a federal investigation into U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley’s use of private planes owned by S.C. businessmen. The group, Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, says Haley undervalued the flights by tens of thousands of dollars on her annual financial disclosure form required of federal officials. The complaint was filed before Haley announced she was resigning as ambassador on Tuesday. Haley’s resignation is seemingly unrelated to the ethics complaint. The ethics group says the flights create the impression of impermissible gifts to a public official. However, Haley said on her disclosure the men are all personal friends and, thus, exempt from federal rules about accepting flights on private planes.

[The Hidden Money Funding the Midterms](#)

POLITICO

Allies of Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell used a blind spot in campaign finance laws to undercut a candidate from their own party this year — and their fingerprints remained hidden until the primary was already over.... The move worked like this: Start a new super PAC after a deadline for reporting donors and expenses, then raise and spend money before the next report is due. Timed right, a super PAC might get a month or more undercover before being required to reveal its donors. And if a super PAC launches right before the election, voters won't know who's funding it until after they go to the polls. The strategy — which is legal — is proving increasingly popular among Democrats and Republicans. The amount of super PAC spending during the 2016 congressional primaries in which the first donor disclosure occurred after the primary election totaled \$9 million. That figure increased to \$15.6 million during the 2018 congressional primaries and special elections.

[Trump Campaign Aide Sought to Create Fake Online Profiles](#)

The New York Times

A top Trump campaign official requested proposals in 2016 from an Israeli company to create fake online identities, to use social media manipulation and to gather intelligence to help defeat Republican primary race opponents and Hillary Clinton, according to interviews and copies of the proposals. The Trump campaign's interest in the work began as Russians were escalating their effort to aid Donald J. Trump. Though the Israeli company's pitches were narrower than Moscow's interference campaign and appear unconnected, the documents show that a senior Trump aide saw the promise of a disruption effort to swing voters in Mr. Trump's favor. The campaign official, Rick Gates, sought one proposal to use bogus personas to target and sway 5,000 delegates to the 2016 Republican National Convention by attacking Senator Ted Cruz of Texas, Mr. Trump's main opponent at the time. Another proposal describes opposition research and "complementary intelligence activities" about Mrs. Clinton and people close to her, according to copies of the proposals obtained by The New York Times and interviews with four people involved in creating the documents.

[Trump Has Long-Standing Business Ties with Saudis](#)

The Washington Post

For President Trump, Saudi Arabia is not just a political ally. It has also been a customer. Trump's business relationships with the Saudi government — and rich Saudi business executives — go back to at least the 1990s.... Business from Saudi-connected customers continued to be important after Trump won the presidency. Saudi lobbyists spent \$270,000 last year to reserve rooms at Trump's hotel in Washington. Just this year, Trump's hotels in New York and Chicago reported significant upticks in bookings from Saudi visitors. Now, Trump's

administration is trying to get answers from Saudi leaders about the disappearance of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi — a critic of the Saudi regime who was allegedly abducted, and possibly killed, inside the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul last week. The crisis has brought scrutiny to Trump's business ties with the Saudis — and the complexity they add to an already complicated U.S. relationship with the kingdom.

[Trump's Patron-in-Chief](#)

ProPublica

With a fortune estimated at \$35 billion, Adelson is the 21st-richest person in the world, according to Forbes.... He is slowing down physically; stricken by neuropathy, he uses a motorized scooter to get around and often stands up with the help of a bodyguard. He fell and broke three ribs while on a ferry from Macau to Hong Kong last November. Yet Adelson has spent the Trump era hustling to expand his gambling empire. With Trump occupying the White House, Adelson has found the greatest political ally he's ever had. "I would put Adelson at the very top of the list of both access and influence in the Trump administration," said Craig Holman of the watchdog group Public Citizen. "I've never seen anything like it before, and I've been studying money in politics for 40 years."

[Trump Nominee Draws Scrutiny for Ties to Ukrainian Energy Interests](#)

The New York Times

As tanks, artillery and combat troops streamed from Russia into Ukraine in 2014, the United States government dispatched a multiagency team of technical experts to Kiev to help the fragile government there shore up its energy supply for the coming winter. The head of that team, William N. Bryan, was a career civil servant with an expertise in energy infrastructure and security. But he was a neophyte when it came to the notoriously factional and corrupt world of Ukrainian politics. And it was not long before American and Ukrainian government officials began raising concerns that he was being co-opted by a Ukrainian company seen as aligned with a prominent oligarch — concerns that grew when Mr. Bryan later joined a consulting firm that pursued business proposals with the company. Now, four years later, those relationships are attracting new scrutiny as Mr. Bryan awaits a Senate confirmation vote to become President Trump's homeland security under secretary for science and technology.

[Trump Lawyers Working on Answers to Mueller's Conspiracy Questions](#)

POLITICO

Special counsel Robert Mueller has delivered written questions to President Donald Trump and his lawyers about a potential Russian conspiracy with the Republican's 2016 campaign to influence the election, according to a source familiar with the matter. The submitted questions bypass — for now — a high-stakes legal fight over whether Mueller will try to force a sit-down

interview with the president via subpoena. It also represents a small breakthrough in negotiations between Trump's lawyers and the special counsel that have been moving ahead in fits and starts for nearly a year. In sending over their written questions, Mueller's prosecutors told the president's legal team they wouldn't rule out asking the president follow-ups based on the answers they get, the source said. It's unclear how long Trump's team has to answer Mueller's questions. Even so, the president's lawyers have been preparing for months to respond to the special counsel on the record and under penalty of perjury.

[Made and Distributed in the U.S.A.: Online Disinformation](#)

The New York Times

In 2016, before the presidential election, state-backed Russian operatives exploited Facebook and Twitter to sway voters in the United States with divisive messages. Now, weeks before the midterm elections on Nov. 6, such influence campaigns are increasingly a domestic phenomenon fomented by Americans on the left and the right.... Politics has always involved shadings of the truth via whisper campaigns, direct-mail operations and negative ads bordering on untrue. What is different this time is how domestic sites are emulating the Russian strategy of 2016 by aggressively creating networks of Facebook pages and accounts — many of them fake — that make it appear as if the ideas they are promoting enjoy widespread popularity, researchers said. The activity is also happening on Twitter, they said. The shift toward domestic disinformation raises potential free speech issues when Facebook and Twitter find and curtail such accounts that originate in the United States, an issue that may be sensitive before the midterms. "These networks are trying to manipulate people by manufacturing consensus — that's crossing the line over free speech," said Ryan Fox, a co-founder of New Knowledge, a firm that tracks disinformation. This month, Twitter took down a network of 50 accounts that it said were being run by Americans posing as Republican state lawmakers. Twitter said the accounts were geared toward voters in all 50 states. On Thursday, Facebook said it had identified 559 pages and 251 accounts run by Americans, many of which amplified false and misleading content in a coordinated fashion.

[John Kyl Granted Extension on Financial Disclosure Form](#)

POLITICO Playbook

Sen. Jon Kyl (R-AZ.), who was named to fill John McCain's Senate seat, has said that he will serve likely until the end of the year. He had been previously working as a lobbyist for Covington and Burling. How much was he making there? We might never know! He was granted an extension on his financial disclosure form until "no later than January 03, 2019." He might be out of the Senate by then!

IN THE STATES

[Complaints of Voter Suppression Loom Over Georgia Governor's Race](#)

The New York Times

Tensions escalated in the already bitter race to be Georgia's next governor on Thursday after reports that the state had placed tens of thousands of voters' registrations on a "pending" list, fueling charges of voter suppression and election rigging. The office of Brian Kemp, Georgia's secretary of state and the Republican nominee for governor in November's election, has stalled more than 53,000 voter applications, according to a recent report from The Associated Press. The list includes a disproportionately high number of black voters, the report said, which is stirring concern among nonpartisan voting rights advocates and supporters of Stacey Abrams, the Democratic candidate, who is vying to be the first black woman in the country to be elected governor.... Mr. Kemp's office uses a controversial method called "exact match" to verify voter applications, which in some cases means individuals can be purged from voting rolls if their submitted information has even trivial differences from their government identification, such as an entry error or a dropped hyphen.

KEY OPINION

[Real Democratic Agenda: Lower Health Costs, Less Corruption, More Jobs and Fairness](#)

USA Today (Op-Ed by Reps. Bustos, Jefferies and Cicilline)

Democrats believe that government exists to serve the American people, not just those with the biggest checkbooks. On day one, we will take steps to end the culture of corruption in Washington. We will strengthen ethics laws to remove the corrosive influence of lobbyists and special interests from Congress, stop foreign money from influencing our elections and create more transparency and accountability for our leaders.

[Republicans Keep Stating That They're Fine With Trump's Corruption](#)

The Washington Post (Op-Ed Greg Sargent)

Democrats have vowed to do all they can to access [Trump's] tax returns if they regain the majority in either the House or the Senate. They have also signaled that they will try to get them in order to examine Trump's global business dealings, to determine whether there are any conflicts of interest or other questionable foreign entanglements (*cough* Russia *cough*). But, again, McConnell brushed off any such efforts as mere "harassment." Congressional

Republicans keep cheerfully and openly presenting themselves as the alternative to the party that actually does want to exercise congressional oversight. Indeed, in some cases, they have explicitly argued that voters should keep them in charge of Congress to prevent such oversight from ever happening at all.

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