



DEMOCRACY REFORM TASK FORCE WEEKLY NEWS ROUND UP

December 22, 2018

NATIONAL NEWS

[The Democratic House Is Taking on Ethics Reform First. We Need It.](#)

The Washington Post (Editorial)

House Democrats won a majority in the next Congress not because they are unified behind Medicare-for-all — they are not — or because they favor an infrastructure plan — which President Trump does, too. They won in some previously GOP-friendly areas because they promised an alternative to Mr. Trump’s undignified, cynical behavior. They appear to have received voters’ message. The first major action the new Democratic majority plans to take next year is not the embrace of a left-wing ideological hobby horse, but an ambitious plan to tighten up the nation’s democratic procedures, combat big money in politics and enhance political ethics rules. Senate Republicans may balk at the bill, set to be the first filed in the House next year. But they will have a hard time explaining why.

[Senate Democrats Join the Push for Sweeping Anti-Corruption Legislation](#)

Vox

House Democrats’ first bill of the year — a sweeping anti-corruption and pro-Democracy reform bill known as House Resolution 1 — is getting a companion bill in the Senate. Sen. Tom Udall (D-NM) is planning to introduce a companion bill in the Senate early next year, he told senators on Tuesday in a Dear Colleague letter obtained by Vox. The bill text would likely be an update of an existing bill Udall introduced in 2017, tweaked to mirror the House legislation. HR 1 is the first bill House Democrats will tackle once they retake the gavel next year; it’s aimed at stamping out the influence of money in politics, curtailing Washington lobbying, and expanding voting rights. Democrats are hoping to get some Republicans on board as well, but the reality is that Republican leadership in the Senate likely won’t let Udall’s bill make it to the floor. Still, it’s a sign that Democrats in the House and the Senate are serious about proposing a wide swath of reforms that could dramatically change American campaign finance laws, expand voting rights, and institute new rules that crack down on lobbying... Udall and Senate Democrats have been quietly working on these ideas for a long time. On his bill, Udall is already working with Sens.

Sheldon Whitehouse (RI), Ben Cardin (MD), Amy Klobuchar (MN), Tammy Baldwin (WI), Dick Durbin (IL) and others, and is looking for more partners. He has also been working with Rep. John Sarbanes (MD), the Democrat spearheading HR 1 in the House, since May.

[Democrats Plan Separate Fix For Voting Rights Act To Make Chief Justice Roberts Happy](#)

The Huffington Post

Democrats' reform package, their first bill of the new Congress, will still include major voting rights reforms alongside its other pieces of campaign finance and ethics reforms. The bill will still include legislative language mandating automatic voter registration, preventing overly broad voter purges and promoting early and online voting. It will also include an affirmation in support of reauthorizing the Voting Rights Act along with a statement of facts inserting present-day examples of voter suppression into the congressional record.

[Nearly Every Trump-Led Organization Is Under Investigation](#)

The Washington Post

Two years after Donald Trump won the presidency, nearly every organization he has led in the past decade is under investigation. Trump's private company is contending with civil suits digging into its business with foreign governments and with looming state inquiries into its tax practices. Trump's 2016 campaign is under scrutiny by special counsel Robert S. Mueller III, whose investigation into Russian interference has already led to guilty pleas by his campaign chairman and four advisers. Trump's inaugural committee has been probed by Mueller for illegal foreign donations, a topic that the incoming House Intelligence Committee chairman plans to further investigate next year. Trump's charity is locked in an ongoing suit with New York state, which has accused the foundation of "persistently illegal conduct." The mounting inquiries are building into a cascade of legal challenges that threaten to dominate Trump's third year in the White House. In a few weeks, Democrats will take over in the House and pursue their own investigations into all of the above — and more.

[Trump's Inauguration Paid Trump's Company — with Ivanka in the Middle](#)

ProPublica

When it came out this year that President Donald Trump's inaugural committee raised and spent unprecedented amounts, people wondered where all that money went. It turns out one beneficiary was Trump himself. The inauguration paid the Trump Organization for rooms, meals and event space at the company's Washington hotel, according to interviews as well as internal emails and receipts.... During the planning, Ivanka Trump, the president-elect's eldest daughter and a senior executive with the Trump Organization, was involved in negotiating the price the hotel charged the 58th Presidential Inaugural Committee for venue rentals. A top inaugural planner emailed Ivanka and others at the company to "express my concern" that the hotel was overcharging for its

event spaces, worrying of what would happen “when this is audited.” If the Trump hotel charged more than the going rate for the venues, it could violate tax law.

[Trump Still Makes Money from His Properties. Is This Constitutional?](#)

The New York Times

The Constitution prohibits the president from accepting payments from foreign and domestic governments. President Trump owns hotels and other properties that are frequented by foreign and domestic government officials. These facts, claim plaintiffs in two lawsuits that have cleared several hurdles, add up to repeated and multiple violations of the Constitution.



[Trump 2020 Campaign Involved in Illegal NRA Coordination Scheme](#)

OpenSecrets

The Trump campaign funneled money to ad buyers alleged to have facilitated illegal coordination between the campaign and the NRA by routing funds through a secretive LLC that appears to be little more than a shell company, an investigation by the Center for Responsive Politics has found. While the Trump campaign stopped reporting payments to ad buyers alleged to have facilitated illegal coordination between the campaign and the NRA after the 2016 election cycle,

Trump's 2020 campaign has continued to deploy the same individuals working for the firms at the center of the controversy through payments to Harris Sikes Media LLC — a low-profile limited-liability company operating with no website or public-facing facade whatsoever. Facing the illegal coordination allegations are National Media, Red Eagle Media Group and American Media & Advocacy Group (AMAG), closely tied consultancies that share staff, resources and adjacent storefronts in Alexandria, Va. CRP's analysis of Federal Communications Commission (FCC) records found that Trump campaign political ad disclosures on file with stations across the country have continued to include signatures and names of individuals working for National Media, despite no mention of National Media or its known affiliates on any FCC or Federal Election Commission (FEC) disclosures. Those individual ad buyers' names have simultaneously continued to be included in ad documents for the National Rifle Association (NRA) and America First, but with the ad buyers' affiliation listed as National Media or one of its affiliates.

[Zinke's Likely Successor Is a Former Oil Lobbyist](#)

The New York Times

With Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke departing at the end of the year, the agency will likely be run, at least for a time, by its deputy secretary, David Bernhardt, a former oil lobbyist who has played a central role in enacting President Trump's agenda of rolling back conservation measures and opening up public lands to drilling and mining. Mr. Bernhardt's supporters and detractors say that while Mr. Zinke has been the public face of some of the most significant reversals of public land protections in the nation's history, behind the scenes it has been Mr. Bernhardt pulling the policy levers to enact Mr. Trump's aggressive energy agenda.

[Wilbur Ross Said He Divested a Stock Holding — But He Didn't](#)

Center for Public Integrity

U.S. Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross twice submitted sworn statements to ethics officials saying he had divested stock that he in fact still owned, a new document obtained by the Center for Public Integrity reveals. The disclosure, in a new filing by Ross, represents the latest in a series of inaccurate statements and omissions in Ross' personal financial statements since President Donald Trump tapped him as Commerce secretary in late 2016.

Ross was supposed to sell his BankUnited, Inc. stock, valued at up to \$15,000, within 90 days of his Senate confirmation, according to his federal ethics agreement — in other words, by the end of May 2017. Ross twice submitted disclosure reports to federal ethics officials saying he had divested the stock — once in a transaction report from May 2017 and another time in his annual financial disclosure from August 2018. But in October, Ross filed another transaction report with ethics officials acknowledging he had had not divested the BankUnited stock when he said he did — and continued to own it until October 1, 2018. The Office of Government Ethics has not yet certified this latest transaction report, but released the document in response to a request from the Center for Public Integrity.

[Want to Run an Agency? It Helps to Know Mitch McConnell](#)

POLITICO

The Trump administration, staring down a \$54 billion pension crisis, is placing its faith in a man who is a stranger to most of Washington but for one big connection: His brother-in-law is Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and his sister-in-law is Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao. Gordon Hartogensis has little professional paper trail, and has largely just managed his family's sprawling investment portfolio after striking gold in a '90s startup and retiring by the time he was 29. But he is expected to gain Senate confirmation by the end of the year to run the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation, the troubled government backstop for people whose pension plans have become insolvent.... Hartogensis' low public profile and his lack of government and management experience sets him apart from previous occupants of the job, who have typically worked in politics and at federal agencies such as the Treasury Department and the Office of Management and Budget before taking over.

[The Corruption of the Republican Party](#)

The Atlantic

The corruption I mean has less to do with individual perfidy than institutional depravity. It isn't an occasional failure to uphold norms, but a consistent repudiation of them. It isn't about dirty money so much as the pursuit and abuse of power—power as an end in itself, justifying almost any means. Political corruption usually trails financial scandals in its wake—the foam is scummy with self-dealing—but it's far more dangerous than graft. There are legal remedies for Duncan Hunter, a representative from California, who will stand trial next year for using campaign funds to pay for family luxuries.* But there's no obvious remedy for what the state legislatures of Wisconsin and Michigan, following the example of North Carolina in 2016, are now doing.... The corruption of the Republican Party in the Trump era seemed to set in with breathtaking speed. In fact, it took more than a half century to reach the point where faced with a choice between democracy and power, the party chose the latter. Its leaders don't see a dilemma—democratic principles turn out to be disposable tools, sometimes useful, sometimes inconvenient. The higher cause is conservatism, but the highest is power.

[The New Money Rules for Democrats](#)

U.S. News

Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont would seek to raise gobs of money early, with designs on amassing north of \$275 million for a primary campaign. For a significantly lesser known Midwest mayor, like 36-year-old Pete Buttigieg, a haul of just a few million dollars in a quarter would be notable. As a fleet of potential Democratic presidential candidates calculate how much money they can – and will need to – raise for a prospective 2020 run, they're also confronting a new reality that where their money comes from could factor almost as greatly as how much they collect. One of the legacies of the 2018 midterm election is the definitive pall it cast on corporate

political donations among progressives. More than half of the U.S. House candidates backed by the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee swore off money from corporate political action committees.... As a newly Democratic-controlled House readies to move on several pieces of legislation in January aimed at reforming the campaign finance system, exposing "dark money" by anonymous donors and strengthening the requirements separating candidates and outside groups, there will be even more pressure to adhere to a fresh set of rules, regardless of whether they are law or not.

IN THE STATES

[A Policy Analysis of Small-Donor Matching Funds for New York Elections](#)

The Campaign Finance Institute

There is every reason to believe campaign finance reform will be high on the agenda for the New York State Legislature in 2019. The state's governor, Andrew Cuomo has proposed small-donor matching fund programs since he took office in 2011, but his proposals have foundered in the Republican-led Senate. After the 2018 election put Democrats in a majority in both chambers, the Assembly and Senate will each have as its leader someone who has been on record as a sponsor of small-donor matching funds. While nothing can ever be certain, the odds clearly have changed. In light of this situation, the Campaign Finance Institute (CFI) today has released "Small-Donor Matching Funds in New York State Elections: A Policy Analysis of the Potential Impact and Cost ." The full report is based on a rigorous analysis of how key provisions in the governor's past bills would have affected each of the candidates who ran in 2014 or 2018. While the legislative details may change in 2019, this is a reasonable starting point for future discussion.... Despite all of this action, no state has adopted and successfully implemented a public financing system for gubernatorial and legislative elections since Connecticut in 2006. New York's would be the first new system statewide since Citizens United. If adopted, it would surely be taken as a signpost by others.

[Facebook, Google Pay to Settle State Political Campaign Ad Probe](#)

The Star (Online)

Facebook Inc and Google will pay Washington state a combined U\$455,000 (RM1.9mil) to settle allegations that they skirted transparency rules for election campaign advertising, one of the first such fines against the Silicon Valley giants amid growing scrutiny of their influence on US elections. Washington's attorney general accused the companies in a June lawsuit of failing to document about US\$6mil (RM25mil) in political advertising on their sites dating back to 2013. The settlements aren't an admission of wrongdoing, according to filings in state court in Seattle. Facebook and Alphabet Inc's Google have faced increasing criticism over their roles in elections since it was revealed two years ago that Russian agents used their social networks to meddle in

the US election. On Monday, the Senate released two reports it commissioned that showed Russia's activity was even broader than previously known, and criticised the tech companies for not acting fast enough to combat the threat.

KEY OPINION

[From Day One, Democrats Will Fight to Restore Ethics to Politics](#)

The Inquirer (Op-Ed by Mary Gay Scanlon and John Sarbanes)

As we speak with newly elected members of Congress from across the country, we hear one loud, clear, and consistent refrain — that many of them decided to run for office to restore faith in our democratic institutions and return us to a government of, by, and for the people. Democratic leadership in Congress has heard this call too, and has stated unequivocally that the very first order of business in the 116th Congress will be to introduce and pass a comprehensive reform bill that will diminish the role of money in politics, restore ethics and integrity to our government, and make sure that every American has access to the ballot box. On Election Day, Americans held a referendum on the kind of government they want to see. Voters here in Pennsylvania and across the country made clear they want to reestablish the shared ideals that have served as the bedrock of our democracy for more than two centuries. They want to end the corrosive influence of wealthy donors and well-connected special interests. They want public servants to serve the public, not strive for self-enrichment. And they want to make it easier, not harder, to vote.

[Welcome to Wiscoligarchy: A Domino In The Downfall of Democracy](#)

Milwaukee Independent (Column by Russ Feingold)

What Republican legislators just did in Wisconsin – passing bills to strip key powers from the governor-elect, Tony Evers, and other newly elected Democratic officials, is a total betrayal of the people of Wisconsin and our nation’s democratic ideals. Michigan is passing a similar set of bills and North Carolina Republicans are accused of paying someone to steal absentee ballots and commit election fraud for a U.S. House candidate. In Ohio, other undemocratic efforts are under way. It seems that Republican officials nationwide from Donald Trump to Mitch McConnell and right down the line don’t have a problem assaulting our democracy if it means holding onto their power. This is not how democracy works, and these maneuvers in Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio, and North Carolina are not just power grabs. They are deliberate efforts to undermine democracy and our faith in it. And these efforts are getting more brazen and desperate every year. I am enraged and, frankly, sick of the shenanigans.... That’s why the group I have founded, Legit Action, is joining with like-minded groups like Common Cause and Daily Kos to support the House Democrats’ first legislative priority for next year, HR 1 – a vital set of pro-democracy safeguards that includes many much needed fixes authored by reformers such as Democratic representative John Sarbanes of Maryland.

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