



DEMOCRACY REFORM TASK FORCE WEEKLY NEWS ROUND UP

JANUARY 5, 2018

NATIONAL NEWS

[Obstruction Inquiry Shows Trump's Struggle to Keep Grip on Investigation](#)

CNN

President Trump gave firm instructions in March to the White House's top lawyer: stop the attorney general, Jeff Sessions, from recusing himself in the Justice Department's investigation into whether Mr. Trump's associates had helped a Russian campaign to disrupt the 2016 election.... The lobbying of Mr. Sessions is one of several previously unreported episodes that the special counsel, Robert S. Mueller III, has learned about as he investigates whether Mr. Trump obstructed the F.B.I.'s Russia inquiry. The events occurred during a two-month period — from when Mr. Sessions recused himself in March until the appointment of Mr. Mueller in May — when Mr. Trump believed he was losing control over the investigation.

**Related Story: [Trump Organization Gave Russia-Related Documents to Mueller, Capitol Hill.](#)*

[Trump Inc. Had a Rough Year, but His D.C. Hotel Is Killing It](#)

The Daily Beast

For a host of Trump-branded properties, 2017 brought hiccups. Workers removed the “TRUMP” sign from the hotel formerly known as TRUMP SOHO last week in the dark of night. The move came six months after the hotel formerly known as Trump International Hotel and Tower Toronto reportedly paid the Trump Organization upwards of \$6 million to get out of their contract and rebrand as The Adelaide. Just last month, the AP reported that the owners of the Trump International Hotel in Panama City are trying to de-brand themselves of Trump.

[Ticket Prices Go Up for Trump's New Year's Eve Bash At Mar-A-Lago](#)

The Washington Post

President Trump is set to ring in the new year the same way he has for about two decades — at the lavish party he hosts at his private club here. But this weekend’s gala at Mar-a-Lago, his first since becoming president, will be a little different: The security will be tighter. The crowds will probably be bigger. And the tickets will run \$750 a guest, a hike from last year, according to members and guests. Trump supporters said the extra hassle and cost will be worth it. “It’s a very glam night. I think everyone is even more excited this year than last year, because then he was president-elect, he hadn’t been sworn in,” said Toni Holt Kramer, a member of the club and co-founder of the “Trumpettes USA” group. “Now he’s president, and he’s accomplished so much already.” Membership applications at Mar-a-Lago surged after Trump was elected, leading the club to double its initiation fee to \$200,000 this year.

[Foreign Governments Find Ways to Do Favors for Trump’s Business](#)

McClatchy News

In Indonesia, a local government plans to build a road to shorten the drive between the main airport on the island of Bali and the new high-end Trump resort and golf course. In Panama, the country’s federal government intervened to ensure a sewer system around a 70-story Trump skyscraper shaped like a sail in Panama City would be completed. And in other countries, governments have donated public land, approved permits and eased environmental regulations for Trump-branded developments, creating a slew of potential conflicts as foreign leaders make investments that can be seen as gifts or attempts to gain access to the American president through his sprawling business empire. The White House dismisses these concerns, as does the Trump Organization’s attorney. But when foreign governments that provide gifts to the Trump Organization, even those that benefit other businesses, it puts President Donald Trump in possible violation of the U.S. Constitution’s emoluments clause that states officials may not accept gifts from foreign governments and that no benefit should be derived by holding office.

[Trump Promised to Kill Carried Interest. Lobbyists Kept it Alive.](#)

The New York Times

President Trump’s signature on the Republican tax bill marks his most important legislative achievement to date. It also represents the breaking of a signature promise that helped propel his populist presidential campaign. This week, as senior White House officials acclaimed passage of the tax overhaul in Congress, they also expressed one regret: failing to close the so-called carried interest “loophole” that benefits wealthy hedge fund managers and private equity executives. Despite Mr. Trump’s vows to eliminate a tax rule that allows some rich business leaders to pay lower tax rates than their secretaries, the president in this case was no match for the powerful lobbyists protecting the status quo. “I don’t know what happened,” said Larry Kudlow, the conservative economist who crafted Mr. Trump’s campaign tax plan. “I don’t know how that thing survived,” he said, adding “I’m sure the lobbying was intense.”

[Trump's True Priorities Revealed in Holiday News Dumps](#)

The Washington Post

On the Friday before Christmas, the Interior Department moved to renew expired leases for a copper and nickel mining operation on the border of the park, reversing a decision that was reached by the Obama administration after careful deliberation. This directly benefits the Chilean mining firm owned by billionaire Andrónico Luksic, who rents a six-bedroom mansion to the first daughter and her husband, Jared Kushner, in the posh Kalorama neighborhood of Washington. Reflecting the terrible optics of this, the Interior Department didn't even put out a release to let reporters know the news. They also didn't give a heads up to Minnesota Gov. Mark Dayton (D), who opposes the mines. Instead, Juliet reports, aides from Interior notified Minnesota House Speaker Kurt Daudt (R), who then broke the story.... Luksic says there is no connection between his business and his real estate relationship with the Trumps, and a White House spokesperson said Ivanka and Jared were "not aware of the situation, had nothing to do with it and have never met their landlord."

[U.S. to Roll Back Safety Rules Created After Deepwater Horizon Spill](#)

The New York Times

The Trump administration is poised to roll back offshore drilling safety regulations that were put in place after the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil rig disaster in the Gulf of Mexico that killed 11 people and caused the worst oil spill in American history. A proposal by the Interior Department's Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement, which was established after the spill and regulates offshore oil and gas drilling, calls for reversing the Obama-era regulations as part of President Trump's efforts to ease restrictions on fossil fuel companies and generate more domestic energy production. Doing so, the agency asserted, will reduce "unnecessary burdens" on the energy industry and save the industry \$228 million over 10 years. "This proposed rule would fortify the Administration's objective of facilitating energy dominance" by encouraging increased domestic oil and gas production, even as it strengthens safety and environmental protection, the proposal says.

**Related Story: [Trump Administration Plan Would Widely Expand Drilling in U.S. Continental Waters.](#)*

[Trump Admin. May Have Admitted to Violating Campaign Finance Law](#)

Think Progress

Katie Walsh, President Trump's former White House deputy chief of staff, reportedly provided unflattering information about the president and his administration to Michael Wolff, author of the soon-to-be-published book *Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House*. Now, according to

an Axios report on Thursday, senior Trump White House officials “are debating whether Katie Walsh should be fired from Trump’s main outside group, America First.” But there’s one major problem. If the report is true, campaign finance law experts say, it would put the Trump administration in clear violation of a provision of the campaign finance law commonly known as McCain-Feingold. America First Policies is a tax-exempt 501(c)(4) organization that aims to support Trump’s “America first” policy agenda. The group’s leadership includes several former staffers of Trump and Vice President Mike Pence, including Walsh — a “senior adviser.” But while much of the group’s activity is policy advocacy, it spent nearly \$2 million in “independent expenditures” on special federal elections in Alabama and Georgia in 2017.

[Trump Abolishes Controversial Commission Studying Alleged Voter Fraud](#)

The Washington Post

President Trump announced Wednesday that he is disbanding a controversial panel studying alleged voter fraud that became mired in multiple federal lawsuits and faced resistance from states that accused it of overreach. The decision is a major setback for Trump, who created the commission last year in response to his claim, for which he provided no proof, that he lost the popular vote to Democrat Hillary Clinton in 2016 because of millions of illegally cast ballots. The commission met only twice amid the series of lawsuits seeking to curb its authority and claims by Democrats that it was stacked to recommend voting restrictions favorable to the president’s party. In a statement, White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said there is “substantial evidence of voter fraud” and blamed the ending of the commission on the refusal of many states to provide voter data sought by the panel and the cost of ongoing lawsuits.

[Trump’s Voter Fraud Crusade Is Just Beginning](#)

New Republic

Voting rights advocates have good reason to celebrate the demise of President Donald Trump’s controversial Advisory Commission on Election Integrity, which he shut down on Wednesday amid mounting legal challenges.... Trump’s decision to shift the commission’s work over to the Department of Homeland Security, where it will draw less public scrutiny, is “very dangerous,” warns Maine Secretary of State Matthew Dunlap, a Democrat on the commission who won a partial court victory after suing the panel for keeping him in the dark about its activities.... And the conservative anti-fraud activists who dominated the commission, including its vice chair and de facto head, Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach, aren’t about to stop making mischief. Kobach has said that Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials will now quickly start matching federal databases identifying noncitizens with state voter rolls. The Justice Department, moreover, shows no sign of backing down from its demand that states hand over evidence of following voter registration laws—widely seen as precursor to federal lawsuits that will pressure states to purge their voter rolls.... Voter purges may well be the new face of voter

suppression, as J. Christian Adams, a commission member and anti-fraud activist, signaled last month at a gathering of the American Legislative Exchange Council.

**Related Op-Ed: [The Supreme Court Has a Chance to Redeem Itself on Voting Rights.](#)*

IN THE STATES

[The Modern Campaign-Finance Loophole: Governors Associations](#)

The Wall Street Journal

In October 2014, the Republican Governors Association needed help in Maryland, where the gubernatorial race was tight. So it called Mountaire Corp., one of America's largest suppliers of chicken products. Companies can't donate large sums to candidates in many states, including Maryland. But they can give unlimited sums to governors associations, which sometimes use the donations to support a company's favored politician without any indication in the public record of the original source. According to a then-RGA official, the RGA needed \$500,000 for an ad campaign to help Republican Larry Hogan. Mountaire was facing tough new environmental regulations in Maryland, where it raises and processes millions of chickens every year. Mr. Hogan had criticized the regulations.... In about half the states with gubernatorial elections in 2018, companies can't give directly to candidates, or are sharply limited, said Phil Cox, who was executive director of the RGA from 2011 through the 2014 election, and now advises corporations on policy and political activity. Instead, he said, "corporations give to the RGA or DGA to try to provide support to that candidate."

[The Citizens Election Program Is at Risk Again](#)

Connecticut Viewpoints (Opinion)

The people of Connecticut have spoken. We want our elections to be focused on the people, preferably on the constituents the candidates seek to represent. That's why we passed the Citizens' Election Program, shifting power away from lobbyists and the few politicians who care more about cash than constituents. We put that power in the hands of the people, where it belongs. Small dollar donors and voters have spoken — the Citizens' Election Program is one of the most popular initiatives over its 12-year run so far. Candidates in both parties have spoken, with participation rates consistently above 75 percent. All of us continue to speak up every time legislative leaders pretend their budget shortfall can be fixed by cutting the Citizens' Election Program which represents 58 one-thousandths of the state budget. But somehow, the chatter at the pre and post-holiday parties in Hartford these past weeks surfaced yet another

attack by legislators who want to shutter the Citizens' Election Program. It will be the second attack on CEP this session, if rumors prove true.

[Delegates Form Caucus to Reduce Corporate Money in Virginia Politics](#)

Richmond Times-Dispatch

Several members of the freshman class of state delegates whose historic wins stunned Virginia's political world in November are forming a caucus intended to reduce corporate money in state politics. Members agree to vote as a bloc on campaign finance reform and consumer protection bills, and agree not to take contributions from public-service corporations — things like electric and telecom companies and railroads. A political action committee attached to the People's Caucus does not accept contributions from corporations, only from individuals. "It's an independent legislative caucus that's set up to further the policy goal of returning power to the voters in the General Assembly," said Del.-elect Lee Carter, D-Manassas, who unseated Republican Del. Jackson H. Miller, a member of the GOP leadership, as Democrats erased a 66-34 GOP majority in the House. The caucus and PAC will help legislators make a bold step and break away from corporate money, he said.

[Judge Recommends Pa. Supreme Court Uphold Congressional Map](#)

The Inquirer

A Commonwealth Court judge recommended Friday that the Pennsylvania Supreme Court uphold the state's map of congressional districts in a high-profile gerrymandering lawsuit that challenges the map as unconstitutionally drawn to benefit Republicans. Democrats hold a 5-2 majority on the state's high court, which has fast-tracked the suit. The justices scheduled oral arguments for Jan. 17 in Harrisburg. "A lot can and has been said about the 2011 Plan, much of which is unflattering and yet justified," wrote Commonwealth Court Judge P. Kevin Brobson, who had been tasked by the high court with holding a trial and submitting "findings of fact" and "conclusions of law" before the end of the year. The plaintiffs had shown that partisan considerations were taken into account in creating the map, he wrote, and that more politically neutral maps could have been drawn that would not have been as favorable to Republicans.

KEY OPINION

[How to Make Regular Folks' \\$50 Donations Count in Elections](#)

Chicago Sun Times (Editorial Board)

As political campaigns heat up going into the March 20 primary election, it's a good time to think about drawing more voters into the process. Too often, average voters think their voices are drowned out by waves of money. Too often, they're right. An effective answer would be to set up a system that turbocharges small campaign donations by matching them with larger amounts of public funding, typically six dollars for every dollar an average citizen gives. That would amplify the voices of ordinary voters, which so often are drowned out by increasingly large flows of cash from wealthy donors. Candidates who might not pay much attention to someone who forks over \$100 would have more reason to do so if public matching boosted that donation to \$700. A system of matching small donations would encourage candidates to return to retail politics instead of spending so much of their time placing phone calls to people with hefty bank accounts. Candidates often complain they have to make those calls if they want to run viable campaigns. They also complain about donors who hand over \$5,000 to an aldermanic candidate, for example, and then two months later call up and ask for a zoning change in the alderman's ward.

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