



DEMOCRACY REFORM TASK FORCE WEEKLY NEWS ROUND UP

JANUARY 19, 2018

NATIONAL NEWS

[Trump's Report Card: Voters Say He's No Genius, Hasn't Drained Swamp](#)

POLITICO

Donald Trump's quarterly report card is in — and if he were back in school, he'd find himself on academic probation. More voters give Trump a failing grade for his first year as president than think he deserves an "A" or "B," according to a new POLITICO/Morning Consult poll, conducted earlier this month. Trump's best marks come on the economy, jobs and fighting terrorism. But he gets poor marks for his handling of health care, the national debt and foreign relations. Overall, 35 percent would give him an "F" — slightly more than the 34 percent of voters who would give Trump an "A" or "B" grade for his first year. The remaining voters give him a "C" (14 percent) or a barely passing "D" (11 percent), and 5 percent have no opinion. The gender gap that marked his election remains wide.... Few voters think Trump has changed the culture of the nation's capital: Only 22 percent give him an "A" or "B" on "draining the swamp," while nearly twice as many (42 percent) think he deserves a "D" or an "F."

[Report: A Year's Worth of President Trump's Conflicts of Interest](#)

Citizens for Responsible Ethics in Washington

During President Trump's first year in office, CREW worked to monitor, log, and categorize every instance in which government and special interests interacted with the president's private businesses. The results were posted on the interactive timeline Trump Inc.: A Chronicle of Presidential Conflicts. Ultimately, CREW recorded more than 500 timeline entries related to potential conflicts of interest.... Taken together, the 500+ entries on the Trump Inc. timeline present a clear picture of a presidency being used to turn a profit and the president's businesses serving as points of access to the corridors of power.

[Trump Embroiled in 'Unprecedented Conflicts of Interest,' Report Warns](#)

CNBC

Sixty-four trade groups, foreign governments, Republican candidates and others stayed at or held events at properties linked to President Donald Trump during Trump's first year in office, a political watchdog group said in a report released on Tuesday. The arrangements represented "unprecedented conflicts of interest" because Trump oversees the federal government and has not divested from properties he owns or that carry his name, Public Citizen, a nonpartisan group, said in the report. Shortly before taking office last year, Trump said he would hand off control of his global business empire to his sons Donald Jr. and Eric, and move his assets into a trust to help ensure that he would not consciously take actions as president that would benefit him personally. Many government and private ethics watchdogs said the president should have gone farther, divesting assets that could cause a conflict of interest. The White House declined comment on the Public Citizen report, which is based on filings to the U.S. Federal Election Commission and news stories. It referred the issue to the Trump Organization. A spokesperson there did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

**Related Story: [How Much Money Has Trump Made from His Hotels And Golf Clubs?](#)*

**Related Story: [Ethics Experts on Trump's Worst Abuses During His First Year.](#)*

[FBI Investigating Whether Russian Money Went to NRA to Help Trump](#)

McClatchy News

The FBI is investigating whether a top Russian banker with ties to the Kremlin illegally funneled money to the National Rifle Association to help Donald Trump win the presidency, two sources familiar with the matter have told McClatchy. FBI counterintelligence investigators have focused on the activities of Alexander Torshin, the deputy governor of Russia's central bank who is known for his close relationships with both Russian President Vladimir Putin and the NRA, the sources said. It is illegal to use foreign money to influence federal elections. It's unclear how long the Torshin inquiry has been ongoing, but the news comes as Justice Department Special Counsel Robert Mueller's sweeping investigation of Russian meddling in the 2016 election, including whether the Kremlin colluded with Trump's campaign, has been heating up.

[After a Year in Office, Questions About Trump's Foreign Deals Go On](#)

NPR

From the moment Donald Trump was elected president, questions started arising about his ability to separate his private business deals from his official duties. Critics became especially alarmed about his overseas holdings, fearing they could influence his foreign policy decisions. In the year since taking office, has he found ways to address the ethical questions that could taint his foreign policy credibility? Just before Inauguration Day on Jan. 20 2017, Trump tried to tackle the issues by holding a press conference. He promised he'd sign no new foreign deals

while in office. In a show of good faith, he said he had just been offered a \$2 billion deal to open a golf course in Dubai, "and I turned it down!" But Trump didn't mention that he already has two golf course deals in Dubai with the same developer.

[Trump Towers Buyers in India Offered Chance to Meet Donald Trump Jr.,](#)

The Washington Post

Prospective buyers of luxury apartments in the new Trump Towers project outside India's capital are being lured with an unusual promise: If you buy a flat, we will fly you to the United States to meet Donald Trump Jr. The developers of the 600-foot high-rises unveiled a sleek sales office in the New Delhi suburb of Gurgaon last week, claiming they racked up \$23 million in sales — more than 20 units — in the first day. The sweetener? One of the developers, Pankaj Bansal, told the Press Trust of India that "Donald Trump Jr. will host" the first 100 buyers in the United States. Bansal, the director of M3M India, one of the partners on the project, declined to comment for this story. But a representative for the project confirmed Bansal's remarks and added that the specifics of the buyers' trip — where they would be flown and under what circumstances they would meet Trump Jr. — were still being worked out.

[Secret Money: Trump Made Millions Selling Condos to Unknown Buyers](#)

Buzzfeed

More than one-fifth of Donald Trump's U.S. condominiums have been purchased since the 1980s in secretive, all-cash transactions that enable buyers to avoid legal scrutiny by shielding their finances and identities, a BuzzFeed News investigation has found. Records show that more than 1,300 Trump condominiums were bought not by people but by shell companies, and that the purchases were made without a mortgage, avoiding inquiries from lenders. Those two characteristics signal that a buyer may be laundering money, the Treasury Department has said in a series of statements since 2016.... The agency is considering requiring real-estate professionals to adopt anti-money-laundering programs. All-cash purchases by shell companies do not by themselves indicate illegal or improper activity, and they have become more common in recent years in both Trump buildings and other luxury home sales across the United States.

[Trump Got Cash from Payday Lenders, Then Weakened Lending Rules](#)

International Business Times

Less than two months after President Donald Trump tapped his budget director to run the independent federal agency tasked with protecting U.S. consumers from harmful and predatory financial practices, the agency has moved to undo a rule intended to prevent payday lenders from preying on low-income Americans. The reversal — which follows recent congressional proposals with the same objective — is a major win for the \$40 billion payday lending industry,

which has recently started delivering big money to Trump and to congressional critics of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB). The payday lending and title loan industry has been battling the CFPB since Congress created the bureau in 2010 — and the fight has intensified since the bureau started crafting rules to regulate short-term lending in 2015. Since then, payday lenders have given \$1.5 million to congressional lawmakers and another \$300,000 to the Republican National Committee and the National Republican Congressional Committee. The industry also spent another \$6.2 million on politics at the state level.

[Trump to Mark One-Year Anniversary with Gala at Mar-a-Lago](#)

Bloomberg

President Donald Trump will mark the first anniversary of his inauguration on Saturday with a celebration at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida, with tickets starting at \$100,000 a pair. That amount, according to the invitation, will pay for dinner and a photograph with the president. For \$250,000, a couple can also take part in a roundtable. Trump told reporters in November that he had thought about having a celebration that month, a year after his victory over Hillary Clinton, but he was touring Asia at the time. The event, hosted by Ronna Romney McDaniel, the chairwoman of the Republican National Committee, and the casino mogul Steve Wynn, will benefit the Trump presidential campaign and the RNC.

[Fracking Lobbyists Plan to Spend Big at Trump Hotel](#)

The Intercept

Fracking firms have had much to celebrate over the last year, as the Trump administration and Republicans in Congress have moved swiftly to approve pipeline projects, roll back environmental regulations, and expand drilling access on public lands. It may come as no surprise, then, that the fracking lobby is the latest industry to return the favor by spending thousands of dollars at a Trump family property. The Independent Petroleum Association of America will hold its 2018 “Congressional Call-Up” lobbying event at the Trump International Hotel in Washington, D.C. from March 5 to 7. The agenda, which is publicly available, includes a meeting with officials in Congress and the Environmental Protection Agency, as well as meetings for conference attendees that will take place at the hotel.

[No One Will Say Where Trump's \\$107 Million in Inauguration Money Went](#)

USA Today

Nearly a year after President Trump's inauguration, the committee that raised a record \$106.7 million for the event has not disclosed how much surplus money it still has or provided a final accounting of its finances.... “We must decline comment at this time,” Kristin Celauro, a spokeswoman for the inaugural committee's chairman, Thomas Barrack, said this week in

response to a USA TODAY inquiry about the committee's finances.... Barrack, a California investment manager and longtime Trump friend, has said consistently that remaining funds would go charity. He announced plans in September to give \$3 million to three non-profit groups —The American Red Cross, the Salvation Army and Samaritan's Purse — to help with hurricane relief efforts and said the committee planned more contributions "that serve America's agenda." ... Officials with the American Red Cross and Samaritan's Purse, a group led by evangelist Franklin Graham, declined to comment this week about the inaugural committee donations, saying they do not disclose contributor information.

[The Cost of Corruption: Waste and Abuse in President Trump's Cabinet](#) **Center for American Progress**

Since taking office less than a year ago, President Donald Trump has created the most corrupt administration in modern American history. He has used his position to enrich himself and his family, filled his administration with former industry lobbyists, and sought to prevent an investigation into his shady business practices. The American people have noticed. Not only do most Americans believe President Trump has broken his promise to combat corruption, they also view the Trump administration as the most corrupt government institution in the United States. The corruption is broader than just the President and his family. President Trump has assembled the wealthiest and least experienced Cabinet in recent memory. Unsurprisingly, the president's senior leadership has taken cues from their boss: While arguing for devastating cuts to services that millions of Americans depend on, several Cabinet members have engaged in extravagant — and at times legally questionable — spending on themselves at the taxpayer's expense. Public service requires a respect for and responsible stewardship of public resources. But, based on public information to date, the Cabinet has spent nearly \$2 million on questionable flights and private office upgrades. For scale, these expenditures are more than 33 times what the average American family earned in 2016.

[CDC Director to Miss Fourth Hearing Because of Potential Ethics Issues](#) **The Hill**

The director of the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) has had to cancel another appearance before Congress because of ethics issues, a committee aide told The Hill. This is the fourth time that CDC Director Brenda Fitzgerald has been unable to testify because of potential conflicts of interest. Fitzgerald was appointed to the position in July. Fitzgerald was originally slated to testify Wednesday in front of the Senate's health committee on public health threats, but now is no longer scheduled to appear. Fitzgerald, a former Georgia health official, has divested from many stock holdings since taking the CDC job. But because she's been unable to divest from some holdings due to legal and contractual obligations, she's had to recuse herself from some CDC duties, including testifying in front of Congress.

[U.S. Warned Jared Kushner About Wendi Deng Murdoch](#)

The Wall Street Journal

U.S. counterintelligence officials in early 2017 warned Jared Kushner, President Donald Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser, that Wendi Deng Murdoch, a prominent Chinese-American businesswoman, could be using her close friendship with Mr. Kushner and his wife, Ivanka Trump, to further the interests of the Chinese government, according to people familiar with the matter. U.S. officials have also had concerns about a counterintelligence assessment that Ms. Murdoch was lobbying for a high-profile construction project funded by the Chinese government in Washington, D.C., one of these people said. The project, a planned \$100 million Chinese garden at the National Arboretum, was deemed a national-security risk because it included a 70-foot-tall white tower that could potentially be used for surveillance, according to people familiar with the intelligence community's deliberations over the garden. The garden was planned on one of the higher patches of land near downtown Washington.

[Approps. Bill Would Bar SEC from Requiring Political Spending Disclosure](#)

Star Tribune

The appropriations bill that the Senate and House must pass by Friday to avoid a government shutdown forbids the Securities and Exchange Commission from making publicly traded companies disclose their political spending to shareholders. The language has been embedded in every major federal spending bill since 2016. The prohibition comes as politicians talk about open government and critics lament unlimited corporate contributions allowed under the 2010 Citizens United Supreme Court decision that they say are reshaping elections. Telling regulators they cannot increase shareholder and public awareness of the influence of business on politics is controversial, but not so contentious that its inclusion in the 2018 appropriations bill will lead to a government shutdown, most observers believe.

[House Judiciary Advances Foreign Lobby Overhaul](#)

Roll Call

House Republicans took a significant step Wednesday in an effort to overhaul the nation's foreign lobbying disclosure regulations amid scandals in the influence sector. The House Judiciary Committee advanced as amended, 15-6 along party lines, the measure that would give the Justice Department new subpoena-like investigative powers. That new authority sparked controversy among the panel's Democrats. Though the measure has two Democratic co-sponsors and most of the panel's Democrats said they supported the idea of an overhaul, that still wasn't enough to stop deep partisan divisions from emerging during debate. Democrats complained that the majority party was moving too quickly on the bill, bypassing hearings. They

chided Republicans for not taking on other high-profile matters such as immigration and criminal justice overhauls and examining Russian interference into the 2016 elections.

[Less Than 16,000 Donors Represent Half of 2016 Campaign Contributors](#)

The Washington Post

More than 3.2 million Americans contributed to federal candidates in the 2016 elections, but fewer than 16,000 of them provided half the donations— a sign of the increasing concentration of donor activity in the United States, according to a new report. The analysis released Friday by the Bipartisan Policy Center mapped the growing influence of rich political contributors and independent political groups in the seven years since federal court decisions unleashed a new era of big-money spending. Super PACs spent \$1.1 billion in the 2016 elections, nearly 17 times more than such independent political committees put into federal races in 2010, the first year they came into existence, the report found. “The system has completely transformed,” said Robert Bauer, a Democratic election law attorney who authored the report with GOP campaign-finance lawyer Benjamin Ginsberg and Stanford Law School professor Nathaniel Persily.

IN THE STATES

[Supreme Court Temporarily Blocks North Carolina Gerrymandering Ruling](#)

The New York Times

The Supreme Court on Thursday temporarily blocked a trial court’s order requiring North Carolina lawmakers to produce a revised congressional voting map, making it likely that the midterm elections this year will be conducted using districts favorable to Republican candidates.... The trial court had found that Republican legislators in the state had violated the Constitution by drawing congressional voting districts to hurt the electoral chances of Democratic candidates.... The Supreme Court’s move was expected and not particularly telling. The court, which is considering two other major tests of partisan gerrymandering, has granted stays in similar settings. Its decisions in the pending cases, from Wisconsin and Maryland, are likely to effectively decide the North Carolina case, too.... Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Sonia Sotomayor noted dissents from Thursday’s order, which was brief and unsigned.

[How Do You Run for Governor in Illinois if You Are Not a Billionaire?](#)

Chicago Sun Times (Editorial Board)

To understand why Illinois must reform the way state elections are financed, look no further than Tina Sfondeles’ report in the Sun-Times on Wednesday. J.B. Pritzker is spending

\$156,355.64 to run for the Democratic nomination for governor. Each and every day. Gov. Bruce Rauner is spending \$195,369.25 to run for the Republican nomination. Each and every day. Those numbers, calculated from the two billionaire candidates' latest quarterly filings with the Illinois State Board of Elections, tell a discouraging story. More than ever in politics, money talks. If you don't have it, good luck getting a word in edgewise.... On Wednesday, when the six candidates for the Democratic nomination for governor met with the Sun-Times Editorial Board, they generally agreed on the need for campaign finance reform. Two of the candidates — Chris Kennedy and state Sen. Daniel Biss — are on record as supporting the turbocharging of small campaign donations by matching them with a larger amount of public financing.

[Report: Bringing Fair Elections to Berkeley](#)

MapLight

Poll after poll shows that Americans think that there's too much money influencing politics and that our democracy is facing major hurdles. A report released today by MapLight tells the story of a successful 2016 campaign to reform local elections in Berkeley, California, showing how individuals can improve their government. With the 2018 elections on the horizon, the report provides tips for activists who want to improve democracy in their own communities by creating public financing programs for elections. Bringing Fair Elections to Berkeley offers a case study of the campaign for the Berkeley Fair Elections Act. Passed as a ballot measure—Measure X1—by 65% of Berkeley voters in 2016, the Act established a program that rewards candidates for accepting only small contributions, amplifying the voice of small donors. The Act will be implemented for the first time in 2018. With this program, Berkeley joins the group of municipalities and states around the country that have committed to improving their elections by reducing special interest influence and promoting grassroots engagement.

KEY OPINION

[Our Elections Are in Danger. Congress Must Defend Them.](#)

The Washington Post (Op-Ed By Senators Rubio and Van Hollen)

While the 2016 election may have left our country divided on many issues, it exposed one critical problem that should unite all Americans: Our democratic process is vulnerable to attacks by hostile foreign powers. As our intelligence community unanimously assessed, Russia used social media channels to influence and mislead voters. It also hacked political campaign committees and local elections boards in a brazen attempt to undermine and subvert our elections. There is no reason to think this meddling will be an isolated incident. In fact, we expect the threat will grow in future years. The United States must do everything possible to

prevent these attacks in the future — and lay out the consequences well in advance of our next elections. Today, we are introducing bipartisan legislation to do just that. Our bill, the Defending Elections from Threats by Establishing Redlines Act, would send a powerful message to any foreign actor seeking to disrupt our elections: If you attack American candidates, campaigns or voting infrastructure, you will face severe consequences.

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