



DEMOCRACY REFORM TASK FORCE WEEKLY NEWS ROUND UP

April 20, 2018

NATIONAL NEWS

[Senate Won't Consider Measure to Protect Mueller, McConnell Says](#)

Bloomberg

The Senate won't take up legislation designed to thwart any attempt by President Donald Trump to fire Special Counsel Robert Mueller, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said a week before the Senate Judiciary Committee is likely to approve it. McConnell said in an interview Tuesday with Fox News that he thinks it's unlikely that Trump would fire Mueller, so the legislation is unnecessary. "I am the one who decides what we take to the floor," McConnell of Kentucky said. "That's my responsibility as majority leader. And we will not be having this on the floor of the Senate." The Judiciary Committee plans this week to debate bipartisan legislation that would let the special counsel seek an expedited judicial review of any dismissal, which must be for "good cause." Judiciary panel Chairman Chuck Grassley plans a vote on it next week. Senators on the Judiciary Committee have continued to work on the bill despite McConnell's public comments in recent weeks that he didn't think it was necessary.

[New York Attorney General Seeks Power to Bypass Presidential Pardons](#)

The New York Time

Attorney General Eric T. Schneiderman of New York is moving to change New York state law so that he and other local prosecutors would have the power to bring criminal charges against aides to President Trump who have been pardoned, according to a letter Mr. Schneiderman sent to the governor and state lawmakers on Wednesday. The move, if approved by Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo and the Legislature, would serve notice that the legal troubles of the president and his aides may continue without the efforts of Robert S. Mueller III, the special counsel investigating possible Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election. Under the plan, Mr. Schneiderman, a Democrat, seeks to exempt New York's double jeopardy law from cases involving presidential pardons, according to the letter, a copy of which was obtained by The New

York Times. The current law and the concept of double jeopardy in general mean that a person cannot be tried for the same crime twice.

[Trump Requests Extension to File 2017 Taxes](#)

The New York Times

For decades, presidents have publicly released their tax returns each year — an act of transparency and a way to connect and commiserate with Americans on Tax Day. On Tuesday, President Trump did not even file his taxes. White House officials said Mr. Trump, who has steadfastly refused to make any of his previous tax returns public, requested a six-month extension because of the complexity of preparing his 2017 returns. He plans to file by mid-October, officials said. The announcement came on a day that the president and his allies used to remind people about Mr. Trump's sweeping tax cuts that will lead to savings for many people when the next Tax Day rolls around in April 2019.

[Trump Businesses Made Millions from GOP Groups, Federal Agencies](#)

McClatchy

President Donald Trump's U.S. businesses have received at least \$15.1 million in revenue from political groups and federal agencies since 2015, according to a new report to be released Monday. The money went to Trump's airplanes, hotels, golf courses, even a bottled water company during the presidential campaign and the first 15 months of his presidency, according to a compilation of known records of the spending by Public Citizen obtained by McClatchy. But it was Trump's campaign itself that spent the biggest chunk by far — about 90 percent, or \$13.4 million. It also includes more than \$717,000 from the Republican National Committee; nearly \$595,000 from Trump Victory, the joint fundraising committee set up by the RNC and Trump's campaign; and \$9,000 from the National Republican Senate Committee.

[Trump's Reelection Committee Spends \\$1 out of \\$5 on Legal Fees](#)

The Washington Post

President Trump's reelection campaign spent more than \$1 out of every \$5 on attorney fees this year as the president contended with the ongoing special counsel investigation and a new legal challenge from an adult-film star. Of the \$3.9 million that Trump's committee spent in the first quarter of 2018, more than \$834,000 went to eight law firms and the Trump Corp. for legal fees, according to new Federal Election Commission records filed Sunday. The latest figures bring the Trump campaign's total spending on legal fees to nearly \$4 million since the president took office, records show. In the last quarter of 2017, Trump's campaign committee spent \$1.1 million in legal fees. The biggest share of legal payments in the first quarter of this year — about \$348,000 — went to Jones Day, a law firm representing the campaign in the investigations by

special counsel Robert S. Mueller III and several congressional committees into Russian interference in the 2016 election.

**Related Story: [Trump Campaign Pays Lawyer Who's Trying to Make Daniels Shut Up.](#)*

[Critics Say Payday Lenders Are Buying White House Access with Industry Conference at Trump National Doral Hotel This Week](#)

Miami New Times

As payday lenders from across America converge on Miami this week for the industry's annual conference, they'll be greeted at the airport by signs protesting their arrival. Troublingly, this year's conference is being held at Trump National Doral Miami, where events began Tuesday night and will continue through Thursday. The timing is no coincidence. The Community Financial Services Association of America, a group that represents and lobbies on behalf of payday loan companies, booked the venue last year at a time it was actively seeking allies in Washington to undo tough new regulations on the industry. The Associated Press included the conference in a February story showing numerous examples of special-interest groups booking events at venues owned by President Trump, giving the appearance of pay-for-play.

[Philippine Government to Hold Independence Day Event at Trump Hotel](#)

The Hill

The government of the Philippines, led by President Rodrigo Duterte, will hold its Independence Day celebration at Trump International Hotel in Washington. The event, which will be held on June 12, comes at time when the Trump administration is considering whether to pursue a new trade deal with the Philippines. President Trump has expressed admiration for Duterte, who has been waging a ruthless war against drugs by encouraging extrajudicial killings of drug users and dealers. The policies have resulted in thousands of deaths.

[Trump Promotes Golf Course in Tweet with Prime Minister Abe](#)

@realDonaldTrump

“Prime Minister @AbeShinzo of Japan and myself this morning building an even deeper and better relationship while playing a quick round of golf at Trump International Golf Club.”

[Trump Rewards Big Donors with Jobs and Access](#)

POLITICO

More than a third of the almost 200 people who have met with President-elect Donald Trump since his election last month, including those interviewing for administration jobs, gave large

amounts of money to support his campaign and other Republicans this election cycle. Together the 73 donors contributed \$1.7 million to Trump and groups supporting him, according to a POLITICO analysis of Federal Election Commission records, and \$57.3 million to the rest of the party, averaging more than \$800,000 per donor.... While campaign donors are often tapped to fill comfy diplomatic posts across the globe, the extent to which donors are stocking Trump's administration is unparalleled in modern presidential history, due in part to the Supreme Court decisions that loosened restrictions on campaign contributions.

[Government Watchdog: EPA Broke Spending Law on Pruitt Phone Booth](#)

ABC News

A government watchdog agency concluded that the Environmental Protection Agency violated federal law in spending more than \$43,000 to install a private phone booth in EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt's office, according to a report obtained by ABC News. According to the Government Accountability Office, the EPA did not comply with the Financial Services and General Government Appropriations Act by spending more than \$5,000 on the phone booth without notifying Congress. The EPA "was required to notify the appropriations committees of its proposed obligation," the GAO wrote in the report. "By failing to provide such advance notice, EPA violated section 710" of the Financial Services and General Government Appropriations Act.... The agency previously declined to publicly provide specific details about the private phone booth and whether it technically meets the requirements of a SCIF — a facility used for secure communications to discuss classified information. The EPA already has at least one SCIF elsewhere in its headquarters.

**Related Story: [Homebuilders Paid for Pruitt's Colorado Hotel Stay.](#)*

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**Related Story: [A Guide to the Investigations Faced by Scott Pruitt, E.P.A. Chief.](#)*

**Related Story: [Scott Pruitt's Ethics Inquiries Widen, and G.O.P. Support Shows Cracks.](#)*

[Pruitt's New Deputy: A Coal Lobbyist Steeped in Washington Ways](#)

The New York Times

The Senate on Thursday confirmed the Environmental Protection Agency's second-in-command, Andrew Wheeler, a former coal lobbyist who not only shares the deregulatory zeal of Scott Pruitt, the E.P.A. chief, but also his doubtful view of climate science. More notable, however, are the differences between the two men. Unlike Mr. Pruitt, a Washington outsider caught in a swirl of controversy over his costly first-class travel and security spending, Mr. Wheeler is viewed as a low-key insider with years of Washington experience in the art of pursuing policy change while avoiding public distraction. Deregulation is among President Trump's central campaign promises,

and Mr. Pruitt has proposed ambitious rollbacks of rules governing clean air and water and fighting against climate change.

[Ryan Zinke Is Opening Up Public Lands. Just Not at Home.](#)

The New York Times

When Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke was a state senator from this idyllic mountain town, he drove a Prius, sported a beard and pushed President Barack Obama to make clean energy a priority. Today, the beard and Prius are gone, and Mr. Zinke has emerged as a leading figure, along with Scott Pruitt of the Environmental Protection Agency, in the environmental rollbacks that have endeared President Trump to the fossil fuel industry and outraged conservationists.

In the last year, Mr. Zinke has torn up Obama-era rules related to oil, gas and mineral extraction and overseen the largest reduction of federal land protection in the nation's history, including an effort to slash the size of Bears Ears National Monument. But here in Montana, where support for drilling in certain beloved areas can be a career killer, Mr. Zinke has struck a different note. And as he faces allegations that he has violated travel and ethics rules, an examination of his Interior Department record shows that his pro-development bent has not always applied to his home state, where he is viewed as a fiercely ambitious candidate for future office.

[How the Energy Industry's Wish List Became Interior's To-Do List](#)

Huffington Post

An Interior Department advisory group relied on a top energy industry lobbyist to help draft a list of potential regulatory rollbacks, documents obtained by HuffPost show. At least one suggestion — reducing the role that local environmental concerns play in leasing federal lands for oil and gas development — quickly became a reality. The Onshore Work Group, charged with recommending how Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke ought to regulate federal lands available for fossil fuel development, already has deep ties to the energy industry. Its chair is Kathleen Sgamma, the president of the oil and gas industry group Western Energy Alliance and a vocal proponent of tearing down many Obama-era environmental protections. But metadata from the working group's first draft of recommendations further link the Interior Department with the industry it is tasked with regulating. According to the metadata, Tripp Parks, the Western Energy Alliance's head of government affairs, was the initial author of the document.

[Trump's Trade Rep Spends \\$1M on New Furniture, Blames Obama](#)

New York Post

President Trump's trade representative is spending nearly \$1 million on new furniture — and blaming the Obama administration. U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer spent more than \$917,000 to furnish the two trade offices near the White House, according to contracts

reviewed by The Post. That's a significant increase compared to the last two trade reps. Ron Kirk, President Barack Obama's first trade ambassador, spent \$237,000 on office furniture during the first 15 months of his term. His successor, Ambassador Michael Froman, spent \$151,000 during a comparable time span, records show. When asked about the spending spree, Lighthizer's office pointed the finger at the Obama administration. "The furniture purchases are the culmination of a longtime, planned project that began under the Obama Administration to replace two-decade-old furniture," Lighthizer's office said in a statement.

[Senate Votes to Kill Consumer Bureau Auto-Lending Restrictions](#)

POLITICO

The Senate on Wednesday moved to eliminate a 2013 consumer protection measure intended to combat discrimination in auto lending, marking an expansive new use of its power to kill federal regulations. The lawmakers voted 51-47 to gut the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau's guidance, which Republicans attacked as harmful to auto dealers and lenders. The House is expected to pass the measure soon, and President Donald Trump will likely sign it. The consequences of the vote will ripple beyond the confines of the CFPB, which is already on a deregulatory path under the leadership of Mick Mulvaney, Trump's White House budget chief. It was the first time the Senate has used its authority under the 1996 Congressional Review Act to strike down an action taken by an agency years ago, instead of just within the narrow window prescribed by the law. The move also marked a broadening of how Congress has generally used the Review Act to include regulatory guidance, not only agency rules.

[Top Energy Aide Dumps Trump to Lobby for K Street](#)

Washington Examiner

After an administrative gap year, Mike Catanzaro has returned to K Street from the White House.... The former presidential aide will head back to his earlier corporate home at the CGCN lobbying group. His time with Trump makes him invaluable to industry. Just ask Larry Kudlow. "In just a short time on the job, I realized Mike was an integral member of the NEC team and played an important role in crafting domestic energy and environmental policy," the NEC director and Trump economic adviser said in an official statement that will soon double as an endorsement.... The firm added additional glaze in a statement by noting that its new hire would "observe all ethics requirements applicable to Catanzaro as a former White House employee." What are those requirements? The aide can't lobby his former colleagues at his old agency for five years, and he can never lobby on behalf of a foreign government. But those lobbying restrictions are thin. Although Catanzaro won't be lobbying the NEC directly, he can advise clients on its machinations and coach his fellow lobbyists on how to win influence there.

[CDC Chief Stepped Down from Four Groups to Comply with Ethics Rules](#)

The Washington Post

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Robert Redfield has resigned his positions at four groups, including a gene therapy biotechnology company and a conservative AIDS organization, to comply with government ethics rules, according to his financial disclosures. Redfield, a longtime HIV/AIDS researcher who started the job March 26, succeeded Brenda Fitzgerald, the former Georgia public health commissioner, who resigned Jan. 31 after serving only half a year because she was unable to divest from her financial holdings. She had also purchased tobacco stocks as CDC director. "The job of CDC Director is very important to me," Redfield said in a statement issued Tuesday. "Therefore, I have worked closely with the HHS Ethics Office to comply with all reporting requirements of the Ethics in Government Act." His public financial disclosure report has been reviewed by the ethics office of the Health and Human Services Department, to which the CDC belongs.

[State Energy Leader Named Deputy Assistant Secretary for DOE](#)

Columbus Business Journal

A visible face in Ohio's energy industry has been named to a high-level position in the U.S. Department of Energy. Shawn Bennett has been named deputy assistant secretary for oil and natural gas in the Department of Energy's Office of Fossil Energy, the agency announced Monday. This is one of four deputy assistant secretary roles that reports to Steven Winberg, assistant secretary for fossil energy. Bennett has been in public affairs and government relations for more than 10 years and was most recently executive vice president for the Ohio Oil and Gas Association, the state's trade organization for oil and gas producers, which has 2,000 members across the industry. Bennett had been right-hand man to longtime leader Tom Stewart and replaced him after he retired in 2014. In this new role, Bennett will administer oil and gas programs including research and development, analysis and natural gas regulation.

[Monsanto-Linked Lobbyist Likely to Become Key Commodities Regulator](#)

TYT Network

President Donald Trump's pick to help lead a key financial regulatory agency is married to the top lobbyist for Monsanto—a company over which she will have oversight—and until last year did lobbying work for an industry she will also oversee, federal documents show. The nominee, Dawn DeBerry Stump, earlier worked for one of the key architects of a 2000 law that deregulated risky Wall Street speculation that contributed to the 2008 financial crisis. Stump was nominated last year to sit on the Commodity Futures Trading Commission (CFTC), which was created to regulate trading of commodities such as wheat and corn—but now includes futures contracts for other commodities and financial instruments such as swaps. Some analysts worry that

insufficient financial regulation could cause another crisis, as student loan, auto loan, and credit card debt have reached staggering heights. Now, after almost a year, the Senate is expected to move on confirming Stump's nomination in the near future.

[G.O.P. Donor Pushed for Trump to Golf with Malaysian Premier](#)

The New York Times

White House aides were worried enough about a visit last year by Prime Minister Najib Razak of Malaysia, under investigation by American prosecutors who say he embezzled \$3.5 billion from a state investment fund, that he was denied the customary photo in the Oval Office with President Trump. But that did not stop a top Republican fund-raiser, Elliott Broidy, from seeking to use his White House ties to press for Mr. Trump to play a golf game with Mr. Najib, who had the authority over negotiations for a lucrative Malaysian contract with Mr. Broidy's private defense company, according to documents obtained by The New York Times. In addition to providing new details about Mr. Broidy's attempts to exploit his White House connections for personal gain, the documents also raise questions about whether Trump administration officials were aware of his efforts.

[How Russian Facebook Ads Divided and Targeted U.S. Voters](#)

Wired

Over the last year and a half, mounting revelations about Russian trolls' influence campaign on Facebook have dramatically altered the scope and focus of Kim's work. In the course of her six-week study in 2016, Kim collected mounds of evidence about how the IRA and other suspicious groups sought to divide and target the US electorate in the days leading up to the election. Now, Kim is detailing those findings in a peer-reviewed paper published in the journal Political Communication. The researchers couldn't find any trace, in federal records or online, of half of the 228 groups it tracked that purchased Facebook ads about controversial political issues in that six-week stretch. Of those so-called "suspicious" advertisers, one in six turned out to be associated with the Internet Research Agency, according to the list of accounts Facebook eventually provided to Congress. What's more, it shows these suspicious advertisers predominantly targeted voters in swing states like Wisconsin and Pennsylvania.

[Audit Approved Facebook's Policies, Even After Cambridge Analytica](#)

The New York Times

An auditing firm responsible for monitoring Facebook for federal regulators told them last year that the company had sufficient privacy protections in place, even after the social media giant lost control of a huge trove of user data that was improperly obtained by the political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica. The assertion, by PricewaterhouseCoopers, came in a report

submitted to the Federal Trade Commission in early 2017. The report, a redacted copy of which is available on the commission's website, is one of several periodic reviews of Facebook's compliance with a 2011 federal consent decree, which required Facebook to take wide-ranging steps to prevent the abuse of users' information and to inform them how it was being shared with other companies. The accounting firm effectively gave Facebook a clean bill of health. "Facebook's privacy controls were operating with sufficient effectiveness to provide reasonable assurance to protect the privacy" of users, said the assessment.

[Kris Kobach, Face of Trump's Voter Fraud Panel, Is Held in Contempt](#)

The New York Times

Kris W. Kobach, the secretary of state of Kansas and face of the Trump administration's efforts to clamp down on supposed voter fraud, was found by a federal judge on Wednesday to have disobeyed orders to notify thousands of Kansans in 2016 that they were registered to vote. Mr. Kobach, who served last year as the vice chairman of the Trump administration's short-lived presidential commission on voter fraud, was reprimanded in a 25-page ruling by Federal District Judge Julie A. Robinson of Kansas, who held him in contempt of court.

IN THE STATES

[Top GOP Official Says Trump Won Wisconsin Because of Voter ID Law](#)

Mother Jones

Election officials and Democrats in Wisconsin have repeatedly argued that the state's strict voter ID law allowed Donald Trump to win the state in 2016 by keeping thousands of voters—predominantly in Democratic-leaning areas—from the polls. Now a top Republican official in the state is saying the same thing. "We battled to get voter ID on the ballot for the November '16 election," Wisconsin Attorney General Brad Schimel, who defended the law in court, told conservative radio host Vicki McKenna on April 12. "How many of your listeners really honestly are sure that Sen. [Ron] Johnson was going to win reelection or President Trump was going to win Wisconsin if we didn't have voter ID to keep Wisconsin's elections clean and honest and have integrity?" The law, which went into effect in 2016, required specific forms of government-issued photo identification to vote. In a cover story last year, Mother Jones reported that the law kept tens of thousands of eligible voters from the polls and likely tipped the state to Trump.

KEY OPINION

[The President Is Not Above the Law](#)

The New York Times (Editorial Board)

News reports point to a growing possibility that President Trump may act to cripple or shut down an investigation by the nation's top law-enforcement agencies into his campaign and administration. Lawmakers need to be preparing now for that possibility because if and when it comes to pass, they will suddenly find themselves on the edge of an abyss, with the Constitution in their hands. Make no mistake: If Mr. Trump takes such drastic action, he will be striking at the foundation of the American government, attempting to set a precedent that a president, alone among American citizens, is above the law.... The president is not a king but a citizen, deserving of the presumption of innocence and other protections, yet also vulnerable to lawful scrutiny. We hope Mr. Trump recognizes this. If he doesn't, how Republican lawmakers respond will shape the future not only of this presidency and of one of the country's great political parties, but of the American experiment itself.

[Scott Pruitt Has Become Ridiculous](#)

The New York Times (Editorial)

Despite stiff competition, Scott Pruitt, the administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, is by common consensus the worst of the ideologues and mediocrities President Trump chose to populate his cabinet. Policies aside — and they're terrible, from an environmental perspective — Mr. Pruitt's self-aggrandizing and borderline thuggish behavior has disgraced his office and demoralized his employees. We opposed his nomination because he had spent his career as attorney general of Oklahoma suing the federal department he was being asked to lead on behalf of industries he was being asked to regulate. As it turns out, Mr. Pruitt is not just an industry lap dog but also an arrogant and vengeful bully and small-time grifter, bent on chiseling the taxpayer to suit his lifestyle and warm his ego. Any other president would have fired him. Mr. Trump praises him.... And — no small chiseler in his own right — Mr. Trump seems to care not a whit about Mr. Pruitt's mounting ethical problems, which have lately reached a point where Mr. Trump's chief of staff, John Kelly, has reportedly told the president that he should think seriously about letting Mr. Pruitt go.

[What the Facebook Hearings Reveal about Corporate Power in D.C.](#)

Vox (Piece by Lee Drutman)

Much of the commentary after last week's hearings focused on just how technologically illiterate members of Congress, particularly the senators, showed themselves to be. Understandably, they are not experts. They are generalists, and many are so old and laden with assistants that they don't use a lot of the technology themselves. But given the wide range of subjects on which they

are expected to make decisions, I can forgive them some doddering confusion about the technology at hand. It is complicated. What I can't forgive them is the knee-jerk attitude that Facebook — or any large, powerful company — should come up with its own ideas for self-regulation and submit them for approval. Certainly, it's fair that Facebook and its \$12 million team of 41 well-connected lobbyists should play some role. But that role should be part of a series of investigatory and information-gathering hearings that take in a broad range of perspectives.... The problem is that Congress just doesn't invest in policy expertise like it did once upon a time. For decades, both the House and the Senate have been cutting their own investments in policy staff, leaving a Congress that gets dumber and dumber each year, and more dependent on whatever expertise they can get from elsewhere. And mostly, that expertise comes from business lobbyists. Congress now spends less money on its staffing resources than businesses spend on registered lobbyists in Washington.

[Facebook Hearings Are Not Enough: Congress Must Act](#)

Seattle Times (Op-Ed by Rep. Derek Kilmer)

While the theatrics might have made for compelling television, Congress did nothing to actually address the underlying problems in our elections. For example, Congress did not vote on The Honest Ads Act, a bipartisan bill I introduced to shine a light on the murky world of online political advertising. It would require internet companies that host political ads to tell us who bought them. We already have these requirements for television and radio. Passing The Honest Ads Act is a no-brainer. Americans ought to know who's paying for the political ads that show up in their newsfeeds. Even Zuckerberg supports it. In fact, Facebook announced it will voluntarily follow many of the steps the bill requires even if Congress fails to act. Twitter and Microsoft endorsed the Honest Ads Act too. The internet is bigger than Facebook and Twitter and, in America, transparency ought to be the law.

[NRA Proves the Need for Campaign-Finance Reform](#)

Bloomberg (Editorial)

The National Rifle Association is finished answering questions. That's what the organization told Senator Ron Wyden last week in a letter complaining about Wyden's "time-consuming and burdensome" inquiries into the NRA's ties to Russians. That answer isn't good enough. The NRA's relationship with Alexander Torshin, a Russian politician and deputy governor of Russia's central bank who has been linked both to Vladimir Putin and to Russian organized crime, is too troubling to ignore. And the group's dismissive response to Wyden has a larger significance: It underlines the need for full disclosure of sources of political funding.... The DISCLOSE Act of 2017 would require organizations to report information to help determine sources of political funds, and ban campaign contributions and expenditures by corporations controlled, influenced or owned by foreign nationals. This would be a step forward --

whether the groups support gun rights, gun regulations or don't care about guns at all. So far Republicans, including Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, who used to support disclosure but no longer does, have derailed the measure and similar efforts at transparency. The NRA seems determined to operate in darkness. Its refusal to answer Wyden's questions underlines the need for a law that would deny it that choice.

NEW REPORTS

[New Report: Americans Are Worried About Corruption](#)

Global Strategy Group and GBA Strategies

Americans believe corruption is endemic among politicians in Washington, but there are some real differences they see between the parties in Congress and key ways Americans want to hear about the corruption issue. What are Americans most concerned about when it comes to corruption? Donors. Donors. Donors. Overwhelmingly, Americans believe that politicians, especially Republican politicians, only serve the interests of wealthy campaign donors.

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