



DEMOCRACY REFORM TASK FORCE WEEKLY NEWS ROUND UP

September 28, 2018

NATIONAL NEWS

[Kushner's Mission Improbable: Winning Over Wealthy Trump Skeptics](#)

POLITICO

Jared Kushner huddled behind closed doors with some of the Republican Party's most powerful donors at a midtown Manhattan hotel earlier this month. The mission: convince them that the Trump White House isn't a mess.... The appearance before the secretive American Opportunity Alliance donor conference, previously unreported, sheds light on the latest addition to Kushner's expansive portfolio: ambassador to the GOP money set, a contingent that remains wary of the administration and its never-ending tumult. The 37-year-old Trump senior adviser has attended at least four donor gatherings since August, and those close to him say he may soon appear at more. He has been in regular contact with Las Vegas casino mogul Sheldon Adelson, one of the GOP's most prolific benefactors and a staunch pro-Israel figure.

[Former Raytheon Lobbyist Pushed Pompeo to Support Yemen War](#)

The Intercept

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo faced internal opposition to U.S. support for the war in Yemen from State Department staff, according to a recent report. The staffers had become concerned by the rising civilian death toll in the war being carried out by Persian Gulf monarchies, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates — not only owing to bombings of densely populated areas, but also a humanitarian crisis exacerbated by the fighting, with up to 8.4 million people at risk of starvation. Those concerns, however, were overruled after Pompeo discussed the matter with the State Department's legislative affairs team. The legislative affairs staff, according to the Wall Street Journal, argued that restricting U.S. support would endanger billions of dollars in future weapons sales, including a massive sale of precision-guided munitions between Raytheon, a U.S. weapons manufacturer, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE. That staff is led by a former Raytheon lobbyist.

[EPA Places the Head of Its Office of Children's Health on Leave](#)

The New York Times

The Environmental Protection Agency on Tuesday placed the head of its Office of Children's Health Protection on administrative leave, in an unusual move that several observers said appeared to reflect an effort to minimize the role of the office. Dr. Ruth Etzel, a pediatrician and epidemiologist who has been a leader in children's environmental health for 30 years, joined the E.P.A. in 2015, after having served as a senior officer for environmental health research at the World Health Organization. She was placed on administrative leave late Tuesday and asked to hand over her badge, keys and cellphone, according to an E.P.A. official familiar with the decision who was not authorized to discuss the move and asked not to be identified. An E.P.A. spokesman, John Konkus, declined to give a reason for the administrative leave.

[EPA to Eliminate Office that Advises Agency Chief on Science](#)

The New York Times

The Environmental Protection Agency plans to dissolve its Office of the Science Advisor, a senior post that was created to counsel the E.P.A. administrator on the scientific research underpinning health and environmental regulations, according to a person familiar with the agency's plans. The person spoke anonymously because the decision had not yet been made public. The science adviser works across the agency to ensure that the highest quality science is integrated into the agency's policies and decisions, according to the E.P.A.'s website. The move is the latest among several steps taken by the Trump administration that appear to have diminished the role of scientific research in policymaking while the administration pursues an agenda of rolling back regulations. Asked about the E.P.A.'s plans, John Konkus, a spokesman for the agency, emailed a prepared statement from the science adviser, Jennifer Orme-Zavaleta, in which she described the decision to dissolve the office as one that would "combine offices with similar functions" and "eliminate redundancies."

[Washington Rolls Back Safety Rules Inspired Deepwater Horizon Disaster](#)

The New York Times

The Trump administration has completed its plan to roll back major offshore-drilling safety regulations that were put in place after the Deepwater Horizon oil rig disaster in 2010 that killed 11 people and caused the worst oil spill in American history. The Interior Department's Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement, which was established after the spill in the Gulf of Mexico and regulates offshore oil and gas drilling, has finalized a proposal for loosening the regulations as part of President Trump's efforts to ease restrictions on fossil fuel companies and encourage domestic energy production. The rules "created potentially unduly burdensome requirements for oil and natural gas production operators on the Outer Continental Shelf, without meaningfully increasing safety of the workers or protection of the environment," says the new

176-page rule, which is scheduled in the coming days to be published in the Federal Register, before becoming the administration's final policy.

[Documents Show Trump's USDA Pick Has Financial Ties to Agribusiness](#)

Texas Observer

Trump's nominee to head the food safety division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture is deeply entangled with agribusiness. According to ethics documents obtained by the *Observer*, Texas Tech University animal scientist Mindy Brashears has earned at least \$320,000 from her ties to five companies while conducting academic research into food safety in the last six years. She's taken \$100,000 from a South Dakota beef processor to defend the company in a high-profile lawsuit, insisting to a jury that ABC News violated the law when it referred to the company's "lean, finely-textured beef" product as "pink slime." The records also show she has been paid more than \$200,000 in consulting fees and royalties by an Oklahoma animal feed company for sales of a cattle probiotic — a product developed by Brashears. She's been paid for consulting work for grain trader Cargill, pharmaceutical giant Merck and Perdue Farms, the third biggest chicken grower in the country, among others.

[FEMA Chief Reimburse Government for Personal Use of Federal Vehicles](#)

POLITICO

FEMA Administrator Brock Long has been forced to reimburse the government for improper personal use of federal government vehicles and acknowledged "mistakes" that he and FEMA made in using those vehicles. A DHS Inspector General investigation found there was "inappropriate use" of the vehicles, Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen said in a statement released Friday night. Nielsen said she reviewed the IG report that found Long, tasked with helping the government manage the response to hurricanes and other emergencies, used government vehicles for "non-official reasons."

[Trump Anti-Discrimination Official Once Called Most Hate Crimes Hoaxes](#)

The Washington Post

A senior Trump appointee responsible for enforcing laws against financial discrimination once questioned in blog posts written under a pen name if using the n-word was inherently racist and claimed that the great majority of hate crimes were hoaxes. Eric Blankenstein, a policy director at the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, expressed those and other controversial views more than a decade ago on a political blog he co-authored with two other anonymous contributors. In a 2004 post, Blankenstein wrote that a proposal at the University of Virginia to impose harsher academic penalties for acts of intolerance was "racial idiocy." He questioned how authorities could know the motivation of someone using a racial slur.

[Ex-Trump Lawyer Tried to Help Pay Legal Fees for Manafort, Gates](#)

Wall Street Journal

A top lawyer for President Trump this year sought to help pay legal fees for Paul Manafort and Richard Gates, initially trying to divert money from the White House legal defense fund and later soliciting donors and pledging \$25,000 of his own. In both cases, the president's advisers objected to the lawyer's actions over concerns it could appear aimed at stopping the two former aides from cooperating with investigators.

[The Crisis of Election Security](#)

The New York Times

How did our election system get so vulnerable, and why haven't officials tried harder to fix it? The answer, ultimately, comes down to politics and money: The voting machines are made by well-connected private companies that wield immense control over their proprietary software, often fighting vigorously in court to prevent anyone from examining it when things go awry.... There are roughly 350,000 voting machines in use in the country today, all of which fall into one of two categories: optical-scan machines or direct-recording electronic machines. Each of them suffers from significant security problems.... And targeting voting machines is just one way to subvert elections. A hacker (or inside operator) could target voters themselves by deleting their names from the voter roll and electronic poll book — the device used at polling places to verify a voter's eligibility. Or change their precinct assignments to send them to the wrong location, creating chaos and frustration that causes them to leave without voting. Bad actors could also undermine election results by altering tallies as they are transmitted to county offices on election night or posted to public websites. Although these are unofficial results, any discrepancy between these and official tallies compiled days after an election would sow distrust in the outcome, particularly if the winner of a race changes.

**Related Story: [Voting Machine Used in Half of U.S. Is Vulnerable to Attack.](#)*

[Is a New Russian Meddling Tactic Hiding in Plain Sight?](#)

The New York Times

USAREally is based in Moscow and has received funding from the Federal News Agency, a Russian media conglomerate with ties to the Internet Research Agency, the "troll farm" whose employees were indicted by the special counsel, Robert S. Mueller III, for interfering in the 2016 presidential election. Caught flat-footed by the influence campaigns of 2016, intelligence agencies and tech companies in the United States have spent months looking for hidden Russian footprints ahead of the midterm elections. USAREally's website, which began publishing in May, does not advertise its Russian roots. But in many ways, it is operating in plain sight... Today, USAREally's website depicts the United States as a democracy in decline, riddled with crime and divided by partisan rancor.

[Democrats Prepare to Force Vote on Mueller Protection Bill](#)

POLITICO

House Democrats are preparing to force a vote Thursday on a plan to protect special counsel Robert Mueller's probe from interference or unilateral removal by President Donald Trump. Massachusetts Rep. Jim McGovern, with the backing of Democrats on the House Judiciary Committee, intend to introduce the proposal as an amendment ahead of expected consideration of three tax-related bills. The proposal would force Republicans to decide whether to consider the Mueller-protection proposal or sideline it. For Democrats, the effort is a chance to force Republicans on the record on an issue that has generated some bipartisan support in the House and Senate. It's a matter Democrats have described with increasing urgency as Trump has ratcheted up his attacks on Mueller and the investigation of his campaign's contacts with Russia. Republicans, though, have shown little urgency to support the measure, even as most have expressed support for Mueller.

**Related Story: [Rosenstein's Job Might Be on the Line, but Republicans Don't Want to Protect Mueller.](#)*

[Democrats Focusing on Small Donations as Campaign Tactic](#)

Newsday

The two Long Island Democratic candidates are among a growing number nationwide who have made rejecting corporate PAC money a centerpiece of their progressive bona fides as voices independent of corporate influence. Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.) stopped taking such donations in January, joining a handful of other prospective presidential candidates now in the Senate who have made it part of their platform. Incumbents are far more likely than challengers to reap the largesse of corporate PACs, political operatives note. Challengers rejecting it hope to gain far more in credibility and individual contributions. And marquee candidates such as Barack Obama, Bernie Sanders and Rep. Beto O'Rourke, currently running against Sen. Ted Cruz in Texas, have scored huge fundraising successes.

**Related Story: [Democrat Andy Kim Takes Campaign Finance Reform to Republican Tom MacArthur.](#)*

IN THE STATES

[Campaign Finance Bill Moves Forward in Prince George's After Meeting](#)

The Washington Post

A bill to create a public financing system for local political races in Prince George's County advanced this week during a dramatic council meeting that was abruptly adjourned by Chair - Dannielle M. Glaros and then restarted after one of her colleagues was elected temporary chair.

The bill was proposed in January but never voted on by the public safety and fiscal management committee because of concerns that the committee's chair, Derrick Leon Davis (D-District 6), had about its fiscal impact. Although progressive groups say offering public matching funds to candidates can level the playing field between newcomers and better-connected incumbents, Davis said he has "a lot of concerns about spending taxpayer money for political campaigns." On Tuesday, the last day a bill could be introduced and have a reasonable chance of passage this session, sponsor Mary A. Lehman (D-District 1) made a final attempt to move the bill out of Davis's committee.

KEY OPINION

[The GOP Is Buying the House. Literally.](#)

The Washington Post

If Republicans succeed in keeping the House in November, it will have been bought for them by corporations and the rich — quite literally. President Trump recast the Republican Party as a vehicle for the forgotten man. But these putative populists passed a \$1.5 trillion tax cut that, according to a poll this month for the Republican National Committee, is now seen, by a 2-to-1 margin, as a benefit to "larger corporations and rich Americans" over the middle class. And now these same friends of the little guy are running a campaign for the House bankrolled almost entirely by corporate interests and those who can afford to write four-figure checks to politicians.... With that in mind, 164 House Democrats have co-sponsored a "By the People Resolution" from Rep. John Sarbanes (D-Md.) promising action on voting security, automatic voter registration, nonpartisan redistricting, ethics laws, lobbying limits, disclosure of secret campaign money and a constitutional amendment undoing the *Citizens United* ruling. The resolution, introduced in June with the support of Democratic leaders, has zero chance of coming to a vote. It is meant to present voters with a choice for the next Congress: an anti-corruption agenda as the first order of business, or the best House money can buy.

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