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## — News From The States —

# EVENING WRAP



By [Kate Queram](#)

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Behold, political indictment news that is not about Donald Trump! Either we're finally great again or it's just, you know, more of the same, but worse.



### The Big Takeaway

U.S. Sen. Bob Menendez (D-N.J.) and his wife Nadine were indicted Friday on federal bribery charges over allegedly accepting “hundreds of thousands of dollars” — including literal bars of gold — to flex his political muscle on behalf of the Egyptian government and a trio of New Jersey businessmen. [The indictment](#) is the second for Menendez, [who was acquitted](#) in a 2017 corruption trial after the jury deadlocked, [the New Jersey Monitor reported](#).



*U.S. Sen. Bob Menendez (D-N.J.), out in the cold.  
(Photo by Danielle Richards for the New Jersey Monitor)*

The three-count indictment accuses Menendez and his wife of using his office to orchestrate a variety of complex and wide-ranging schemes. In one, Menendez allegedly pressured the U.S. Department of Agriculture to protect a trade monopoly a contact had secured with Egypt. In another, he pushed the Biden administration to nominate a U.S. attorney he believed would be sympathetic to a major donor who was facing fraud charges, prosecutors said. Each of those actions came at a cost — or, really, a variety of costs, including “cash, gold, payments toward a home mortgage, compensation for a low-or-no-show job, a luxury vehicle, and other things of value,” the indictment said.

**Federal agents turned up a lot of those goodies** when they searched the couple’s home in June 2022, including \$480,000 in cash (“much of it stuffed into envelopes and hidden in clothing,” including at least one jacket embroidered with “Senator Menendez”), a 2019 Mercedes-Benz convertible worth more than \$60,000 and 13 gold bars (two one-kilogram and 11 one-ounce), the indictment said.



*HIDE THE MONEY IN LITERALLY ANY OTHER ITEM OF CLOTHING*

*(U.S. Department of Justice photo)*

The charges — and the ludicrous stockpile of Scrooge McDuck-style riches — paint a picture of a lawmaker taking his dedication to “constituent service” to the extreme, said Damian Williams, U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York.

“There are things Senator Menendez can do for his constituents and things that he says he cannot do for his constituents. He put it all on his Senate website,” Williams said at a news conference Friday. “It says he cannot compel agency to act in someone’s favor, it says he cannot influence matters involving a private business, it says he cannot get involved in criminal matters or cases period. We allege that behind the scenes, Senator Menendez was doing those things for certain people — the people who were bribing him and his wife.”

Menendez slammed the indictment in a statement that proclaimed his innocence, accused prosecutors of racial bias and described the investigation as a misrepresentation of “the normal



work of a congressional office.” He later announced plans to [step down temporarily](#) as chairman of the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

“For years, forces behind the scenes have repeatedly attempted to silence my voice and dig my political grave,” he said. “Since this investigation was leaked nearly a year ago, there has been an active smear campaign of anonymous sources and innuendos to create an air of impropriety where none exists. The excesses of these prosecutors is apparent.”



*SPEAKING OF EXCESSES*  
(U.S. Department of Justice photo)

**There’s an excess of equally questionable activity in state legislatures across the country,** where lawmakers have spent the past year chipping away at election policy in hopes of maintaining their own power. Republicans in a trio of states have ramped up those efforts in recent weeks, taking aim at redistricting mandates ([Alabama](#)), election officials ([North Carolina](#)

and [Wisconsin](#)) and, in one case, a state Supreme Court justice (also [Wisconsin](#)), all part of what experts described as a coordinated — and blatant — attempt to manipulate the outcome of future elections.

“We should call this what it is: an effort to lay the groundwork to subvert the will of the voters in future elections,” Joanna Lydgate, CEO of the pro-democracy group States United Action, [told our national bureau](#). “While the focus is often on the national picture, our elections are run by the states. That means we need to keep shining a light on state-level efforts that undermine our democracy. It’s the only way to shut it down.”

**I lack the time to detail all of these efforts — we’d be here until I retire — so let’s focus on Wisconsin**, land of cheese, my birth and a Republican-controlled legislature that’s among the most extreme — and *the* [most gerrymandered](#) — in the country. (The confluence of those two things is rarely a coincidence.) With no fear of competitive elections, GOP lawmakers have long been free to do whatever they want, which has most recently amounted to an all-out state-level war against anyone who might force them to perhaps, someday, actually compete for their legislative seats.





*Just doing whatever they want.*

*(Photo by Henry Redman/Wisconsin Examiner)*

Their first target was Meagan Wolfe, the nonpartisan head of the Wisconsin Elections Commission. The GOP-majority Senate voted this month to oust Wolfe after allowing a hearing on her removal to devolve into a public forum on election-related conspiracy theories. Wolfe refused to step down, saying in a statement that the vote was “not a referendum on the job I do but rather a reaction to not achieving the political outcome they desire.”

“The political outcome they desired,” she added, “is to have someone in this position of their own choosing that would bend to those political pressures.”

Josh Kaul, the state’s Democratic attorney general, filed a lawsuit to stop the ouster, saying the Senate does not have the authority to remove Wolfe. Lawmakers quickly regrouped and are now circulating a petition to impeach her instead.

**But why stop at one shady impeachment when you could have two? The second ouster is**

aimed at state Supreme Court Justice Janet Protasiewicz, a liberal judge who was elected in an April special election by a resounding 11-point margin. Pundits have ascribed her victory in large part to abortion, which was likely to be banned in Wisconsin under a Civil War-era law that Republicans largely had no problem with even though it was, you know, *from the same era as the Civil War*. A Wisconsin judge in July said the policy did not apply to abortion, prompting Planned Parenthood to announce that it would resume abortion services this month. The case is expected to make its way to the state Supreme Court, which, courtesy of Protasiewicz's victory, is now a liberal majority.

**All of which is a problem for Republicans**, both because they are fans of laws written in the 1800s and because the new panel of justices is *also* expected to rule on a case challenging the state's ridiculously gerrymandered legislative maps. Obviously, being forced to un-gerrymander the maps would be a political disaster for Republicans, so they've opted instead to ponder impeaching Protasiewicz if she won't recuse herself from the case. Their reasoning: During her campaign, Protasiewicz described the maps as "rigged" and "unfair," which amounts to "prejudging" the case, even though the case [had not yet been filed](#).



*Just know it probably won't count much in a state legislative race!*

*(Photo by Scott Olson/Getty Images)*

These are new concerns for Republicans, who were unbothered when other (conservative) Supreme Court hopefuls opined on hot-button issues during their campaigns. One candidate sent a campaign mailer featuring a photo of herself brandishing a shotgun and wearing an NRA hat. Another called Planned Parenthood a “wicked organization.” A third wound up embroiled in an ethics investigation after his campaign made a boatload of misleading and icky statements about his opponent’s record on crime, including a commercial that accused him of freeing a convicted child molester who assaulted another child.

**It’s open for debate whether judicial candidates — liberal or conservative — should be making these kinds of statements at all**, though I’d argue that it probably doesn’t matter in states where those candidates are elected rather than appointed. In a world where everything (even technically nonpartisan races) is political, most voters probably already know how a candidate feels about fraught issues like guns or abortion — and those that don’t have that info may want it to inform their choices. (Look, it can be hard to know who to vote for when there’s no R or D on the ballot and you are not an *extremely online* political junkie.) Either way, candidates are going to keep dropping hints about their views, and if that’s the reality, it seems like referring to the nation’s most gerrymandered maps as “rigged” and “unfair” is *probably* less problematic than associating your opponent with child molesters.

Of course, this careful analysis assumes that Republicans care about logic or nuance or appearing like they are advocating for anyone but themselves, which, by all accounts, they do not. The saving grace for Protasiewicz may be the margin of victory in her election, delivered by a bipartisan slate of voters — but then again, it may not. GOP lawmakers appeared to explore other ways to circumvent the map case, including a legislative proposal they said would establish a “fair and nonpartisan” process for redistricting that was scuttled by Gov. Tony Evers after he determined it would ultimately still leave lawmakers in charge of their own district boundaries.





*EXCEPT NOT REALLY*

*(Photo by Olivier Douliery/Getty Images)*

**But they haven't dropped the impeachment idea.** House leaders last week appointed a former panel of Supreme Court justices to "study" the issue and "report back," a likely delay tactic. The group's members are confidential, but at least one is rumored to be a conservative [who donated](#) to Protasiewicz's opponent. Republicans have yet to ask him to recuse himself for it.

**This is one fight in one state, but it's a microcosm of similar battles playing out nationwide.** All have dire implications for democracy in general, said Ben Wikler, chair of the Wisconsin Democratic Party.

"If they can impeach someone successfully to stop them from ruling in a way they don't like, what will they do after the 2024 election?" he asked. "It was [one vote](#) in our state Supreme Court that prevented the 2020 election from being overturned in Wisconsin. And they know who the justices were, so they could just suspend them. This would open the door to monsters that I don't think they'd be able to control."

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## One Last Thing

The Wienermobile is [once again the Wienermobile](#) after a four-month stint as the Frankmobile, a change that was largely ignored or abhorred (or both). The switch, announced in May, was reportedly meant to pay homage to a new recipe for the Kraft Heinz Company's 100% beef franks, but Oscar Mayer backtracked on Wednesday, telling fans that "like you, we missed this BUNderful icon."



*Don't mess with perfection.*  
(Photo by hodagmedia/Adobe Stock)

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