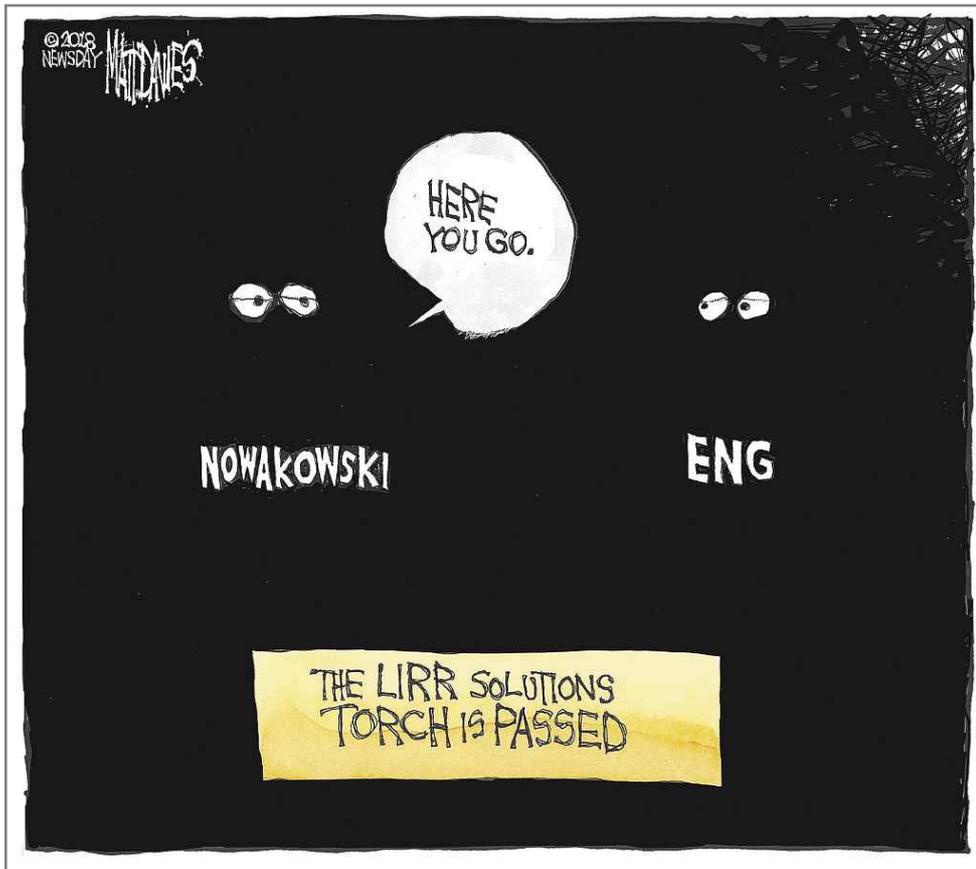


MATT DAVIES



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**BOTTOM LINES**

**Americans have been hearing** for years that the health-care system run by the Department of Veterans Affairs is in crisis. In 2014 came charges that officials at the Phoenix VA and other facilities had altered or destroyed records to hide evidence of lengthy wait times for appointments. In truth, misconceptions mar the debate about how veterans' health care actually works. — PHILLIP LONGMAN, THE WASHINGTON POST

**Given over a decade of childish promises** to do better, Facebook has clearly shown it isn't into fixing itself. Some of the senators threatened regulation, but saber rattling is, in the end, only noise. By contrast, the European Union has approved impressive new rules for tech companies and the information they trade in. — FROMA HARROP, CREATORS SYNDICATE

**After right-wing** Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban won a third consecutive term last week, Pope Francis issued an apostolic exhortation on the subject of holiness. His message centered on the importance of caring for migrants, with the pope arguing that their plight should be as important to Catholics as their opposition to abortion. — ISHAAN THAROOR, THE WASHINGTON POST

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**The obscene cost of politics**

Already well-known men will spend \$200M in a race for U.S. Senate. Why?



Every so often, a number pops out at you. Last week, it was \$200 million. Now, in an age in which increasing numbers of zeros and commas have desensitized us to big numbers, \$200 million might not seem like much.

But this particular \$200 million was the amount experts anticipate will be spent on Florida's U.S. Senate race this fall.

One race. To elect one senator. \$200 million.

Sure, control of the Senate is at stake with the chamber split nearly equally — Republicans hold a 51-49 edge. And sure, the House of Representatives is in play, too. And, yes, Florida is just about the swingiest of swing states, and the race between incumbent Democrat Bill Nelson and GOP challenger Rick Scott, the current governor, is going to be a doozy.

But \$200 million? People who run campaigns say it might cost \$3 million a week for a candidate to saturate Florida with TV advertising. But to what end? Both men have been in the public eye for a while. What about them don't people know?

But this is where we're at. The two major parties just spent more than \$16 million on a special election for a single House seat in Pennsylvania where the winner, Democrat Conor Lamb, will serve seven months before the district ceases to exist as a court-ordered redistricting goes into effect for November's regular election. And remember, there are 435 of these seats.

What's more, our government in Washington barely works and these big spenders swear they'll bring change and work with the other side and get things done, and what happens? Nothing. Would I feel different if the re-

sults of this profligacy were better? Perhaps. But the money itself guarantees they won't be better because many candidates answer to the money-givers.

So we use breathlessly reported fundraising totals to handicap races. And the measure of strength for incumbents and challengers alike is the amount of money in their war chests, not the quality of the ideas in their brains.

We ask for it, in a way. Many voters don't get engaged in races until close to the finish. They just can't, or won't, focus that long. So candidates spend obscenely to reach them.

Because the Supreme Court has ruled that political donations are protected speech, there's probably not much we can do with dollar limits. But we can limit the time during which candidates can spend, which would limit the spending itself — by bringing the start of the race closer to the finish.

Make elections shorter. We don't need endless debates, endless speeches, endless attack ads, endless primaries. We value efficiency in the workplace. Why not in our elections?

In Europe, campaigns are far shorter. Canada, too. And Mexico. And pretty much wherever else democracy is practiced, though not quite in the same form or under the same constitutional protections.

Would March Madness be so much fun if it ran until December? What if the World Series lasted a month? Brevity breeds engagement.

Start with the presidential primaries. Make them a Final Four — four regions, four weeks, every state in each region holds its primary the same day. One debate per round. Do it in September, have party conventions the first week of October, then a month of campaigning.

Shorten the other election seasons to match. Nothing before Labor Day. The fewer the weeks, the lower the cost of TV saturation, the less noise from Nelson and Scott.

I'm confident we all have lots of ideas about how better to spend that money.

Michael Dobie is a member of Newsday's editorial board.