

Romney's out as Walker booms, Keystone XL passes, and the threat to Obamacare subsidies: US national blog round up for 24 – 30 January

USApp Managing Editor, Chris Gilson looks at the best in political blogging from around the Beltway. Our round-up of state blogs will follow on Saturday afternoon.

President Obama, the Democratic Party, and the GOP

On Tuesday this week, *PoliticusUSA* [reports](#) that President Obama's approval rating has climbed to 50 percent – a 19 month high. They say that Obama has become more popular since he took executive action on immigration in November, and went 'on the offensive' after last year's midterm election. Meanwhile, *American Thinker* uses Obama's comments on 'middle class economics' from his recent State of the Union address, to [argue](#) against means tested benefits. They say that despite the President's comments on the links between hard work and opportunity, many Americans are better off if they don't work, and that many of Obama's policies such as paid sick leave and raising the minimum wage would lead to fewer jobs and lower wages. Another proposal announced during the State of the Union was to close a tax loophole which allows middle class families to set aside college funds in tax free accounts. *Hit & Run* [says](#) on Tuesday that a bipartisan consensus has persuaded Obama to give up the plan because of its anticipated effects on the middle classes. On Thursday, *The Daily Signal* [writes](#) that Obama is expected to ask Congress to break its commitment to reduce spending – known as the sequester. They say that Congress should stick to the sequester given that more needs to be done to put the budget on the path towards being balanced.

Looking at the Democratic Party more generally, on Monday, *The American Prospect* [says](#) that Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT) is likely to use his new position as ranking member of the Senate Budget Committee to take on large financial institutions that many consider to be 'too big to fail'. They say that by reframing the financial crisis in budgetary terms, Sanders may be able to 'open a new front' in the debate about Wall Street away from a purely regulatory standpoint. *Daily Kos* [examines](#) what they say is a 'major Democratic electoral dilemma' – the drop off of young voters between midterm and presidential election cycles, and their relatively low turnout rate in general, compared with the party's falling popularity with those over 65.



Senator Bernie Sanders Credit: [Senate Democrats](#) (Flickr, [CC-BY-2.0](#))

Perhaps in response to the president's recent comments at the State of the Union, Republicans are now increasingly discussing the income gap, according to *The Atlantic*. They [say](#) that while 'inequality' is now no longer a dirty word to the GOP, the party's leaders, such as House Speaker John Boehner of Ohio, have dismissed the Democrats' ideas to address the problem, and have few credible plans of their own. Staying on the theme of the economy, *PoliticusUSA* [writes](#) this week that facing dire budgets, a number of Republican Governors are raising taxes on the poor and middle classes, mostly via sales and other consumption taxes.

What does the future have in store for the GOP? *Townhall* [wonders](#) if the party will head the way of the Whigs, a party which imploded in the mid-19th century over its stance on slavery. They say that the modern Republican Party may also be on the verge of disintegration, as its political class is rejecting conservative tenets such as abortion law reform and addressing illegal immigration. *Daily Kos*, meanwhile [criticizes](#) the GOP from the other side of aisle, writing that they may well allow the Department of Homeland Security to run out of funding at the end of February, since many of its 280,000 employees are likely to stay on the job because they are considered to be essential (though they will not get paid). The row stems from the party's seeming inability to stop President Obama's recent executive actions on immigration. According to *Crooks & Liars* this week, new Senator Joni Ernst of Iowa is the GOP's new 'star'. They [say](#) that despite giving an 'underwhelming' response to the President's State of the Union address, the press love many things about her – especially her 'Midwestern realness'.

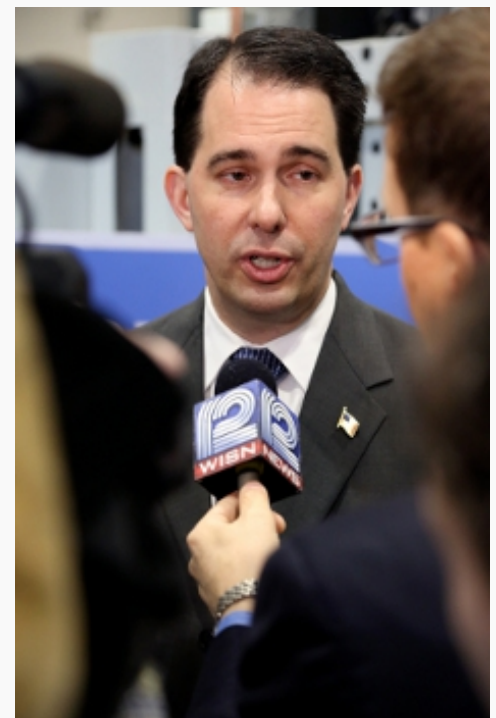
Elections and the road to 2016

With so many undeclared candidates in the running (at least on the Republican side), you would be forgiven for being a little bit confused about where things stand. Thankfully, *The Atlantic* has a handy [cheat sheet](#) of the more than 20 potential candidates from both sides.

On Thursday *Crooks & Liars* [looks](#) at comments from Independent Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont that the former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, may not be as bold as she needs to be in addressing the major crisis of income inequality faced by the country. Many on the left of the Democratic party hope that if Sanders runs, this will force Clinton to move to the left.

Hit & Run [wonders](#) whether or not the 2016 election will be the 'last hurrah' for those in the GOP that oppose gay marriage. They say that the issue is likely to divide moderate Republicans, such as Jeb Bush and Mitt Romney from those farther on the right, like Ted Cruz and Bobby Jindal, and that the election will likely signal the end of the issue as a major one. This week also saw a number of Republican presidential hopefuls gather at the 'Freedom Summit' in Iowa, sponsored by Representative Steve King (R-IA). *The Daily Signal* has some [memorable lines from the event](#). Wisconsin Governor, Scott Walker made quite the splash at the event, reports *National Journal*. They [say](#) that Walker's speech, which urged the party to 'go big and go bold' received a standing ovation. On Wednesday, *Political Animal* looks at the meaning of the current 'Walker boom'. They say that Scott Walker's appeal stems from his proven ability to win in a Democratic state via confrontation, not compromise.

The 2008 Vice-Presidential candidate, Sarah Palin was in the news this week, with her statement that she was interested in running for president in 2016. *American Thinker* [writes](#) that despite the many criticisms against her, Palin is a politician who will stand up for the GOP's principles and values, and will not seek the media's approval. Meanwhile, *Crooks & Liars* [says](#) that the Democratic National Committee's response to Palin's campaign speech in Iowa this week (considered by some to be incoherent) consisted of only two words: "Thank you!"



Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker Credit: Gateway Technical College (CC-BY-NC-ND-2.0)

Many see former Florida Governor, Jeb Bush, as being near to the top of the pack in the running for the GOP's nomination. *National Journal* poured some cold water on the idea this week, [writing](#) that he suffers from a lack of endorsements in Congress. They say that there has also been very little outreach to Congress on Bush's part, in contrast to New Jersey Governor, Chris Christie. Bush also came under criticism this week for a speech on immigration reform. *Crooks & Liars* [says](#) that in the speech, he stated that we should find out who undocumented immigrants are and then "politely ask them to leave", drawing comparisons from Mitt Romney's "self-deportation" comments from the 2012 campaign.

Late last year former Texas Governor, Rick Perry was indicted on felony charges. *Daily Kos* [says](#) on Thursday that despite the charges, Perry will be making an announcement about his 2016 plans in May or June. *The Atlantic* is [critical](#) of another GOP Governor with presidential ambitions this week, Louisiana's Bobby Jindal. They say that Jindal's arguments that liberals are trampling Christians' religious liberty, and that 'non-assimilationist' Muslims are endangering America contradict one another as it discriminates against Muslims' rights to have a culture and identity.

Friday brings the news that Mitt Romney will not be running for the presidency next year. *The Atlantic* [says](#) that Romney's decision is based on him once again appearing in the right place at the wrong time, and that the presence of Jeb Bush in the race would have made gaining the nomination much more difficult.

Rounding out our coverage of the GOP's presidential hopefuls is a [piece](#) from *Hit & Run* on the party's love affair with 'schmucks', who have little or no shot at the job, such as Donald Trump and Sarah Palin.

Government, the Beltway and Congress' agenda

On Monday, *Hit & Run* [reports](#) that the Supreme Court has agreed to hear arguments over whether or not Oklahoma's lethal injection protocol violates the Constitution's protection against cruel and unusual punishment. The review centers on the whether or not the drug the state uses can produce unconsciousness so that the inmate does not experience pain and suffering as the lethal drugs are administered.

In the House this week, *PoliticusUSA* [says](#) that the top Democrat on the special committee investigating the 2012 Benghazi attacks has complained to the panel's Chairman, Trey Gowdy (R-SC), that Democrats have been excluded from crucial steps in the investigation, with Republicans holding 'secret meetings' with witnesses from the State Department.

Moving on to the Senate, *Outside the Beltway* [writes](#) that Senate Republicans are considering abolishing the filibuster for Supreme Court Nominations. The change would expand the change begun by the Democrats in 2013, which eliminated the need for there to be 60 votes to end debate on executive branch nominations and most judicial nominees. This week the Senate held its initial hearings on Attorney General Eric Holder's nominated replacement, New York Attorney, Loretta Lynch. *The Lonely Conservative* [writes](#) that while Lynch is unlikely to be worse than Holder, she will be just as bad if confirmed, given that she is in favor of compelling employers to hire illegal immigrants. *The Atlantic* also [writes](#) on Lynch's confirmation hearings, saying that the biggest incentive that the GOP has for approving her nomination is to get rid of Eric Holder.

According to *The Daily Signal* Kentucky GOP Senator, Rand Paul, has renewed his call for an audit of the Federal Reserve. They [say](#) that Paul wants the Fed's monetary activities to be put under Congressional oversight, and that he has criticized the institution's 'cloak of secrecy'. On Thursday, *PoliticusUSA* [reports](#) that the Senate has passed a bill to authorize the construction of the Keystone XL pipeline to carry Canadian tar sands to the Gulf of Mexico. They say that Republicans still need another 5 votes to reach the 67 needed to override President Obama's likely veto.



Foreign policy, defense and trade

On Sunday, the *White House Dossier* [argues](#) that the fall of the U.S. allied leader in Yemen has led to a severe setback for counter-terrorism operations against al Qaeda in the country. They say that the Houthis who have taken power are Iran's allies, which will give that country a new base to oppose U.S. interests. *Townhall*, meanwhile, [reassures](#) us that a diplomatic deal with Iran is nothing to fear, and that further Congressional sanctions against the country are likely to be ineffective, and that a military attack would only delay the country's

nuclear weapons program.

On Monday, *The Lonely Conservative* [reports](#) that Cuba has ‘walked out’ of talks with the U.S. aimed at repairing the two country’s relations after five decades of embargo. They say that Cuban officials rejected U.S. calls for greater freedoms in Cuba.

President Obama visited India last week – *Roll Call’s Five by Five* uses the visit as a hook to [assess](#) the state of new defense agreements between the two countries. They say that while they are being hailed as a ‘big deal’, they are unlikely to change a great deal overnight.

This week *The American Interest* [examines](#) the fortunes of the F-35 program, the stealthy strike fighter being developed. They say that despite being the most expensive program in U.S. military procurement history, the F-35 may not actually deliver on its promises, and that a recent report has shown that its reliability statistics may have been ‘massaged’.

On Tuesday, *Outside the Beltway* [reports](#) that Army Sgt Bowe Bergdahl, who was held captive in Afghanistan for five years before being released last year in a prisoner swap, will be charged with desertion based on allegations that he abandoned his outpost in 2009 to avoid hazardous duty.

Obamacare and health policy

This week, *The Daily Signal* [writes](#) that a new audit of how the federal government awarded contracts for developing the Affordable Care Act’s online insurance exchanges has found that failures in conducting company background checks has let to cost overruns that cost taxpayers more than \$400 million. *Wonkblog* [reports](#) that the Obama administration has announced that it wants to overhaul the way in which Medicare doctors are paid – by tying their fees to the quality of their care, not the quantity.

Later this year the Supreme Court is likely to decide on whether or not subsidies can be available to federally run state Obamacare insurance exchanges, where states have decided against setting up their own. *PoliticoUSA* [says](#) that a new poll has shown that 64 percent of Americans want to see the subsidies restored if the Supreme Court rules against the healthcare law. *National Journal* meanwhile [writes](#) that health insurance companies and hospitals have mounted an aggressive defence of Obamacare’s subsidies – if they were to be declared unlawful, then not only would 8 to 10 million people lose their coverage, but insurers would miss out on around \$32 billion in payments.

The economy and society

On Sunday this week, *The Lonely Conservative* argues that we have President Obama and his policies to thank for the fact that wages are generally stagnant. They [say](#) that a growing government and an increasing number of regulations mean that high wage sectors such as healthcare and finance are seeing wage declines.

While this year will see an easing of the federal budget deficit to \$468 billion, the Congressional Budget Office has [warned](#) that the growing level of federal debt will mean a tripling of interest payments, reports *Wonkblog*. They say that by 2024, the interest payments alone will triple to \$722 billion. *The Atlantic* looks at another kind of debt that worries many Americans – student debt. They [argue](#) in favor of more flexible repayment plans, which would help avoid defaults, thus benefitting creditors and lenders alike.

On Monday, *Perspectives* [looks](#) at the Republican Party’s attempts to rewrite the Constitution’s 14th amendment – the equal protection clause – to protect unborn children from abortion. They say that by constitutionally protecting embryos, they would deny the same rights to women.

Hit & Run reports on a new study that has found that 2014 was a ‘[banner year](#)’ for letting innocent people out of prisons – 125 compared to 91 in 2013 and 2012. They say that the rise in exonerations is due to prosecutors working with Conviction Integrity Units to identify false convictions.

And finally...

Crooks & Liars [reports](#) that the band the Dropkick Murphys have told Governor Scott Walker not to use their music when he comes on stage to speak as he did this week in Iowa.

This week also saw heavy snowfalls predicted for much of the east coast, with many panic buying staples in preparation. *Wonkblog* [points out](#) that bread and milk are pretty bad as survival foods despite many stores being cleaned out of the products on Sunday.

Still on the storm theme, New Jersey Governor wants to [judge your snowman](#):

Featured [image](#), Mitt Romney Credit: [Gage Skidmore](#) (Flickr, [CC-BY-SA-2.0](#))

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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