Zombies With Addresses
There’s hope in the battle against zombies—zombie properties, that is, those vacant, often abandoned homes wasting away in foreclosure. A new Ohio law reduces the foreclosure process to as little as six months. It may be a model for other states. Supporters say the law safeguards owners’ property rights by requiring the presence of three of 11 factors—disconnected utilities, boarded-up or broken windows, unlocked doors, accumulated trash and vandalism, among them—before foreclosure can begin. As of September, nearly 5 percent of U.S. residential properties—more than 18,000 homes—in foreclosure were also vacant, according to RealtyTrac, which follows housing data. States with the most zombies were New Jersey (3,698), New York (3,556), Florida (2,528), Illinois (1,018) and Ohio (999).

Gaps in Business Ownership
Among the highlights of the Census Bureau’s inaugural Annual Survey of Entrepreneurs is a look at how women, minorities and veterans are doing in the world of business. Women, who represent just over half the U.S. population, owned about 1 in 5 of the nation’s 5.4 million companies with paid employees in 2014. Women owned 1.1 million employer firms; that’s 19.4 percent, and about a quarter of those (254,260) were minority-owned. Of the minority-women-owned employer companies, more than half were Asian-owned. Minorities owned 949,318 firms with paid employees, or 17.5 percent, and veterans owned 405,235, or 7.5 percent.

Whisker Whiz
Lots of kids love their pets. But Rob Macmillan has a special place in his heart for the animals that end up in shelters. For the last two years, the 10-year-old, who lives with his family near Atlanta, has collected food and supplies for people who can’t afford to care for their pets. He profiles adoptable cats and dogs in a monthly magazine column and, through his website, robsrescues.com, advocates for the adoption of shelter pets. He recently discovered an ally: Georgia Representative Joe Wilkinson (R), who sponsored successful legislation this year designating the “adoptive dog” as the official state dog. Rob now has an idea for legislators across the country. “How about we try to make the state dog of all the states that don’t have a state dog a shelter dog?” he wrote in an email to NCSL.

Hospital Sticker Shock
It’s a surprise no one just home from the hospital wants to get. After carefully choosing a facility in your insurer’s network, you receive a bill from a provider who works at the facility but is outside the network. It happens more often than you might think. In California, for example, nearly 1 in 4 patients treated at a hospital in the previous two years said they’d received an unexpected bill from an out-of-network provider, according to a 2015 Consumers Union survey. A new law in the Golden State limits what patients owe to no more than what they would have paid an in-network provider. Physicians’ pay is set at the amount the insurer normally pays a doctor on contract for such services or 125 percent of the Medicare rate, whichever is greater. Doctors may appeal disputes to an independent third party. The Consumers Union predicts other states will follow California’s lead next year.

400 Years Young
Mark your calendars for 2019, when Virginia will celebrate 400 years of representative democracy with “American Evolution,” a series of events and projects commemorating America’s ideals—self-government, diversity, opportunity—and engaging citizens, legislators and global leaders alike. It was in 1619 that the first legislature in the New World met in a church in Jamestown, Virginia. Called the General Assembly, its purpose was to pass laws and improve management of the settlement, which was established in 1607. Virginia House Majority Leader Kirkland Cox (R) and Senate Majority Leader Thomas Norment Jr. (R) are co-chairmen of the upcoming commemoration. Other assembly members and their clerks make up the steering committee. NCSL’s Trust for Representative Democracy, which will serve as a public partner to some of the events, will provide more information as the anniversary approaches.
An International Affair
International observers for U.S. elections? Some states want them, others don’t. In September, California enacted a new law giving international observers “uniform and nondiscriminatory access” to monitor election processes in the Golden State. These are the same kinds of observers that The Carter Center, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and other groups send to Belarus, Brazil, Botswana and other places around the globe. In 2014, Tennessee prohibited United Nations monitors from coming to the Volunteer State. Most states, however, don’t address international election observers at all.

Think Locally, Study Globally
Students can easily take on the world when they know more about it. A new study-abroad pilot program in the District of Columbia gives kids a firsthand look at other cultures. Launched this summer, the program sent 400 eighth- and 11th-grade students on fully paid trips to 12 countries, with funding from private contributions. Students in Costa Rica learned about farming and cooking on outdoor stoves; in Spain they practiced Spanish and learned about bartering in a market. The goal is to send every public school student in the District on two study-abroad trips before graduation. Individual schools across the country have partnered with private organizations to send kids abroad, but the scale of the District’s effort is a first.

AGs Take on Big Energy
U.S. attorneys general are taking on the energy industry over climate change. The top legal officers in 15 states, the District of Columbia and the U.S. Virgin Islands have formed a coalition called AGs United for Clean Power. The group’s goal, says New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman, is to investigate whether fossil fuel companies and industry groups misled investors and the public about the dangers of climate change. More than 40 states used a similar strategy in the 1990s to show Big Tobacco knew its products were addictive and carcinogenic but did not communicate those risks to smokers. The group’s critics dismiss it as a disguised attempt to quash free speech and prosecute climate-change skeptics.