

Opinion: Rigging of the U.S. system

By Janine R. Wedel

Pundits often attribute Donald Trump's success to right-wing "populism." This conclusion is dangerously misleading. Trump's rise is rooted firmly in his ability to make an old-fashioned word—"rigged"—work in surprisingly fresh ways.

Trump correctly diagnosed a feeling among working people that the system was rigged against them, and then leveraged that against his opponents in both parties.

As a social anthropologist who studies both "influence elites" and the workings of bureaucracy, I can help explain why this "rigging" resonates with so many regular people. I began my career in 1980s Poland studying how communist systems worked. In the past decade or so, I've experienced a nagging sense of déjà vu as Americans perceive a widening gap between how they expect the system to operate and how it really does.

I've seen this most clearly among the Trump supporters I encounter in rural Kansas, where I grew up, and rural upstate New York, where I'm a partner in a family business. They all say they are against the system because it's rigged against the little guy at the bottom, even if they have little idea what to replace it with. They may not find him appealing, but Trump would at least "shake things up."

The "system" goes well beyond the government. Whether it's your bank, your doctor, public school, news sources, unions, or even your place of worship, all have posted staggering declines in confidence in recent decades. These institutions also are fundamentally different than they were at the time when public trust was first measured. A bank of today is not the bank of the 1970s, when you could get a mortgage by

talking to the local lending officer with whom you could meet face-to-face. He might not meet your needs, but at least he had the authority to take into account your own circumstances and history in his decision. Today, this all goes by algorithm in some unseen office.

Ditto when I have a sinus infection and need to see a specialist. While I used to be able to call the doctor's office directly, now I have to call a number that routes me through an incomprehensible phone tree and connects me with people who themselves have little authority. Similar changes have proliferated throughout our lives. Which explains why United initially barely apologized when a paying customer was dragged off a flight.

You don't have to spend much time punching through a phone menu to realize that no one, besides you, is incentivized to care if you get a mortgage, heal your sinus infection, or make your flight to Louisville. And, while you know you're interacting with machines, the frustration, impersonality, and disaffection you feel feels like something I have experienced before: the daily disaffection that eventually led people under communism to revolt. Americans have recently lost power and become disconnected from community in ways that can't entirely be explained by money or inequality.

In my research I've found that nearly every policy venue affecting our lives—from foreign policy to health care to the economy—has indeed been rigged to varying extents by elites shaping decisions to fit their own self-interested agendas.

For instance, the banking giant Goldman Sachs favored some of its powerful clients against others (including pension funds) in the notorious Abacus Deal of 2007. When the deal was discovered only one lower-level executive was punished and the company paid a fine that paled alongside its profits. Meanwhile, so many former executives from the company took positions in the administrations since the Bill Clinton era

that the company is jokingly called "Government Sachs."

The sense of pervasive rigging explains the groundswell of distrust that brought President Trump to power last fall. His constant references to Hillary Clinton's private email server and problematic family foundation—raising the idea that she didn't just escape the rules, but actually invented them to serve herself—resonated with many voters.

Ironically, in a mere 100-plus days, Trump has brought the very rigging he has railed against to a new level of blatancy: from Ivanka Trump using her position to promote her fashion line to packing his cabinet with bankers and billionaires with financial conflicts—all while starving parts of the bureaucracy through unfilled positions and budget cuts.

In dismantling and reorganizing governance, Trump is borrowing from the communist playbook: power and personality frequently trump process, formal position, bureaucracy, and elected bodies. He has tried to enfeeble pillars of democracy: civil liberties, a free press, an independent judiciary.

When your democracy doesn't feel like a democracy, the system demands overhaul. Starving it will only lead to more distrust. Public institutions need remaking; they need to re-deliver.

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