How to Talk about Rigged Systems: A Quick-Start Guide

We live in a society rigged by the powerful few to serve their interests at our expense.

This idea—the core assumption of the *System is Rigged* mindset—increasingly animates public thinking about aspects of society, from the economy to education, from healthcare to elections. This mindset is held across the political spectrum, by people of all ages, races, genders, and income levels.

While the mindset is increasingly dominant, it is also fuzzy, leaving a lot of blanks to be filled in: *Who rigs the system? In what way? For and against whom? With what outcomes?* Depending on how these blanks are filled in, this way of thinking can either support a powerful critique of an unjust and under-democratic society, or it can foster fatalism or justify hate and exclusion.

How can our communications help people fill in the blanks?

In this quick-start guide, we're sharing **three core framing elements** that should be included in any communication about rigged systems to channel thinking in productive directions.[1] By "productive directions," we mean that these framing elements have been shown to:

- increase collective efficacy (the idea that change is possible);

- decrease exclusionary attitudes (e.g., xenophobia and antisemitism);

- decrease authoritarian attitudes (e.g., support for a strongman); and/or

- build support for systems change and progressive policies.

FRAMEWORKS
Culture Change
Project

FRAME WORKS

ELEMENT #1
Appeal to values that center collective power.

Messages that appeal to values that center collective power—like *Popular Self-Government, Solidarity, and Freedom from Domination*—help people envision the possibility of unrigging the system. By pairing one of these values with a *critique* of rigged systems, we bring into view our collective power to transform systems—thereby flipping fatalism on its head.

Messages must be tailored to context, but the core idea of each value is as follows:

Popular Self-Government
We believe that *power lies with the people*, and we have *the right to govern ourselves*.

Solidarity
The only way to build the world we want is by *coming together across our differences*.

Freedom from Domination
No one has the natural right to rule over others. We should all be *free from domination*.

The best way to do this is by clearly articulating the value, offering a brief explanation of how the system in question is rigged (see Element #2), and explaining the role of collective action in unrigging the system.

ELEMENT #2
Explain *how* the system is rigged, not just *who* is rigging it.

The *System is Rigged* mindset is malleable, so explaining *how* the rigging works is crucial to ensuring that our audiences aren't filling in the blanks in unproductive ways. Although conventional wisdom might suggest that naming villains (e.g., billionaires) is a useful shorthand for what's wrong and can replace an explanation, the research shows that naming villains alone can *undercut* systemic thinking by focusing on people rather than systems—and in some cases, may open the door to antisemitism.

Focusing instead on *how* systems are rigged is the best way to help people understand how systems work and prevent the scapegoating of marginalized groups. This explanatory approach also builds support for progressive policies like breaking up corporate monopolies, publicly funding elections, and prohibiting partisan gerrymandering.

Again, actual messages will vary, but the key idea is to name the system (e.g., campaign finance system), how it works against the people (by allowing a small number of people to buy influence over elected officials while the rest of us lack a meaningful say), and what happens as a result (corporations profit through tax cuts and weaker labor unions, leaving the rest of us without a fair shot).

Match the scale of the solution with the scale of the problem.

Because the *System is Rigged* mindset often leads to fatalism, communicators must offer solutions to build a sense of efficacy (i.e., the feeling that change is possible). However, communicating about solutions is complicated by the ambition-feasibility paradox: solutions that are ambitious enough to unrig the system don't seem feasible, and solutions that are feasible don't seem ambitious enough to unrig the system.

We can address this paradox by matching the scale at which we explain the problem and solution. When we do this, it cultivates efficacy and builds support for progressive change.

There are two effective ways to do this:

1. **Spotlight a *particular* aspect of a rigged system, explain how it works, and connect the dots to actions that can be taken to unrig that *particular part* of the system.**

   For example: Corporations rig the system against workers by keeping wages low and making it difficult for workers to organize [explanation of problem]. To unrig the system, we must come together across our differences and act together [*solidarity* value]. By joining together in unions, working people can win the right to negotiate for better pay, benefits, and working conditions [explanation of solution]. We can use our strength in numbers to shift the balance of power so that all of us have what we need.

2. **Zoom out and explain rigged systems on a *broader* scale and explain how transformative solutions could unrig the *whole* system.**

   For example: As a society, we believe no one has a natural right to rule over others [*freedom from domination* value]. But right now, the government lets corporations set the terms on which we live and work. The powerful few rig the system by cutting taxes for people at the top, weakening labor unions, and letting employers avoid paying decent benefits. As wealth is concentrated in a few hands, there's even less of a check on the powerful [explanation of problem]. We need to make big, fundamental changes to society—like a maximum wage and a heavy wealth tax—to do away with extreme wealth and the power that comes with it [explanation of solution].

> For more information on the research, a complete explanation of the *System is Rigged* mindset, and further recommendations on talking about rigged systems, read the full research report: *Filling in the Blanks: Contesting What "the System is Rigged" Means*.

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[1] These recommendations are based on four quantitative survey experiments and nine focus groups conducted between 2022–2024. More information on research methods can be found in the full report.