

Rigged Beats Cancelled: Why the System Feels Off (and What Is Still Possible)

Why Everything Feels Wrong But Nothing Ever Stops

A lot of people have the same uneasy feeling right now:

- Elections technically keep happening.
- Courts technically still exist.
- TV panels still talk about “our democracy”.

And yet:

- The people doing the most damage rarely seem to face real consequences.
- The people trying to fix things keep getting ground down.
- Big problems like climate change and AI keep getting kicked down the road.

One way to name what is going on is this:

Nobody is canceling elections. They are turning elections into a rigged game.

At the same time:

The very top tier of power is increasingly treated as too important to ever really hold accountable.

Those are two separate problems, but they feed each other. Think of them as two x-rays of the same broken bone.

This explainer is about:

- what those two x-rays show,
- how they reinforce each other,
- why “just vote harder” is not enough,
- and what is still worth doing at the human scale.

X-ray 1: The Rigged Game

Political scientists have a mouthful of a term: *competitive authoritarianism*.

In plain language, it means:

You still have elections, but the rules are quietly tuned so the people in power almost never lose.

Some signs you are drifting in that direction:

- **Voting gets harder** in ways that mysteriously hit certain groups more than others:
 - stricter ID laws that some people cannot realistically meet;
 - purges of voter rolls that quietly remove thousands;
 - closing polling places in certain neighborhoods;
 - making mail-in or early voting much more complicated.
- **District lines are drawn** so that one party keeps a majority of seats even if they win a minority of votes.
- **The information environment is tilted.**
 - One side's message is everywhere.
 - Corrections and alternative views are easier to ignore or drown out.
- **Watchdogs are hollowed out.**
 - Agencies that are supposed to defend voting rights and honest elections are defunded.
 - Experienced lawyers and civil servants are pushed out and replaced with loyalists.

On paper, everything still looks normal:

- there is a ballot;
- there is a count;
- there are even observers.

But the structure of the system means:

- The opposition can campaign, work hard, “do everything right”.
- Their victories either do not translate into real power, or are quickly undone.

Their participation does not threaten the system; it *legitimizes* it. Their effort becomes the raw material the ruling faction uses to say:

See? We won fair and square. Everyone got to vote.

That is x-ray 1: the house has quietly loaded the dice.

X-ray 2: “Protect the Club” (Elite Impunity)

The second x-ray shows up in cases like Jeffrey Epstein and other “too-connected-to-fail” scandals.

The pattern looks like this:

- There is clear, ugly wrongdoing involving powerful people.
- Investigations stall, shrink, or get watered down when they get close to those people.
- Deals get cut, files get sealed, timelines get stretched.
- By the time full truth is allowed, many of the players are dead, retired, or out of reach.

The system’s instinct is:

Protect the club, not truth first, whoever it hurts.

This is not just about one man on one island. It is about a recurring reflex:

When full accountability would embarrass or endanger the donor class, senior officials, or national security agencies, the system flinches.

That is x-ray 2: the high-roller room has its own private rules.

How the Two X-rays Reinforce Each Other

Now put the two x-rays on top of each other:

1. **Elite impunity** – the most powerful people face the fewest consequences.
2. **Electoral capture** – the rules are adjusted so the same people or factions keep control.

Together, they create a system that is:

- very good at absorbing anger, protests, and outrage;
- very bad at actually changing who holds power or what decisions get made.

This matters especially for the big, slow-burn crises:

- climate change;
- mass extinction;
- the energy transition;
- powerful technologies like AI.

All of those are on a clock:

- You do not have infinite time to fix them.
- A decade of delay can lock in damage you cannot undo.

When you combine elite impunity with a rigged electoral game, you get:

A regime that can veto meaningful climate/extinction/AI action for 10–15 years while still holding elections and saying, “This is the will of the people.”

It does not need to turn into a cartoon dictatorship. It just needs to run out the clock.

Why “Just Vote Harder” Is Not Enough (But Still Matters)

None of this means voting does not matter. It still does.

- Local elections still matter.
- Some courts and agencies are still real arenas of contest.
- The exact balance in statehouses and governorships can change what is possible.

But if our only story is:

Do not worry, just organize better and win the next election.

we are ignoring the fact that:

- the rules of the game are being changed mid-match;
- the referees (courts, watchdogs) are being replaced or intimidated;
- the scoreboard (media and information systems) is being messed with.

So the challenge is:

We need to keep showing up *and* we need to change where some of that effort is aimed.

Not just:

How do we win under these rules?

But also:

How do we use the power we still have to change the rules back toward something fair?

One Big Lever: States Pushing Back (Oppositional Federalism)

Here is one practical idea in plain language:

Use the power of states to push back when the national system is captured.

That is what “oppositional federalism” means. In normal terms:

- States still have their own laws, courts, budgets, and attorneys general.
- In some areas, they can act independently of a captured federal government.

Examples of the kinds of things states can sometimes do:

- **Prosecute powerful people under state law.**
 - Because of how US law works, state criminal charges often cannot be pardoned by a president.
- **Protect voting access** even if the federal government looks away.
 - Keep polling places open instead of closing them.
 - Make mail voting and early voting easier, not harder.
 - Fund their own election security and audits.
- **Lock in some scientific truths for policy.**
 - Treat “CO₂ warms the planet” as settled for state regulation, regardless of federal flip-flops.
 - Protect species and habitats even if federal protections are weakened.
- **Form pacts with other states.**
 - Climate compacts.
 - Shared legal defense funds.
 - Agreements on election standards and data protection.

The point is not to create 50 mini-countries. The point is:

Use the independence states already have to defend basic rule-of-law and buy time while the national system is distorted.

If the federal government stops prosecuting the powerful, states can start. If federal election security is gutted, states can build their own.

That is the hopeful piece: there are tools available right now that do not require waiting for a perfect Congress or a saintly president.

But There Are Risks (This Is Not a Magic Fix)

If states push back hard, there are real dangers:

- **Bad precedent.**
 - If they rush and lose big cases in court, they might create rulings that shut down those tools for good.
- **Mirror-image abuse.**
 - Tools created for good reasons in one context can later be used for bad reasons in another.
- **Soft partition.**
 - If everyone retreats into their own “blue states vs red states” world, it can become impossible to do anything that actually requires national coordination, like decarbonizing the whole grid or managing AI safely.
- **Storyline disaster.**
 - The same moves that look like “defending the republic” to some can be painted as “lawless secession” by others, giving the central government an excuse to crack down.

So if we use these tools, they need:

- **Expiration dates** (sunset clauses).
- **Clear goals** (restore fair rules, not break away forever).
- **Shared frameworks** that survive the conflict (for climate, species protection, AI safety, and so on).

In other words:

The patchwork is not the goal. The goal is a fabric strong enough that patches are no longer needed.

What Can a Normal Person Actually Do?

This all sounds big and abstract. Here are some practical, human-sized moves that matter.

1. Keep voting, but change your focus a bit

Do not only think in terms of presidential elections. Pay attention to:

- governors;
- state attorneys general;
- secretaries of state;
- local election officials.

These are the people who can actually use the state-level tools we just talked about.

2. Support the people quietly holding the line

Election workers, local officials who resist pressure, judges and lawyers who actually care about the rule of law — these people are under real strain now. They often get harassed and threatened.

They need:

- signals of public support;
- donations to legal defense funds;
- being named and thanked, not just blamed when something goes wrong.

3. Share explainers that show the structure, not just the outrage

Instead of only sharing “look at this horrible thing” posts, try to share pieces that:

- show how elite impunity works;
- show how electoral rigging works over time;
- show what state-level tools exist and how they might be used.

Think of it as: give people an x-ray, not just a scary anecdote.

4. Ask your state reps and AGs concrete questions

Not “why don’t you fix everything,” but:

- “Are you exploring ways to prosecute serious corruption that federal officials will not touch?”
- “What is our state doing to protect voting access if federal protections are rolled back?”
- “Are we part of any interstate climate or election security compacts?”

Those questions do two things:

- tell them someone is paying attention;
- give the good ones cover to push harder.

5. Hold on to both halves of the truth

Two statements can be true at the same time:

1. The system is being structurally rigged in ways we have to name clearly.
2. There are still real levers and real people using them that deserve our support.

If we forget the first, we drift back into “norms will save us” sleepwalking.

If we forget the second, we slide into “everything is captured, nothing matters” paralysis.

The point of laying out these x-rays and tools is not to depress people. It is to:

- give language to what many already feel;
- point to places where pressure still does something;
- keep big, slow crises like climate and AI in view while we talk about elections and scandals.

Elections still matter. So do statehouses. So do trust networks across borders. So does refusing to accept “protect the club” as normal.

We do not get to choose the starting position. We do get to choose whether we are just extras in the background, or part of the messy, imperfect effort to push things back toward something fair enough to save what still can be saved.