



A Rising Swamp and a Sinking Feeling

Trump Has Made a Mockery of His Most Fundamental Campaign Promises

January 19, 2017 – A year ago, a new kind of politician rode into town. He claimed to have a singular focus on elevating the fortunes of everyday Americans and a contempt for the culture of Washington, D.C., which he castigated as “the swamp.”

“Today we are not merely transferring power from one administration to another, or from one party to another – but we are transferring power from Washington, D.C., and giving it back to you, the American people,” President Donald Trump said two minutes into his inaugural address.

As if his point were not clear, Trump continued: “January 20th, 2017, will be remembered as the day the people became the rulers of this nation again. The forgotten men and women of our country will be forgotten no longer.”

For nearly 50 years, Public Citizen has undertaken a [mission](#) similar to the one that Trump professed: looking out for the interests of regular people and ensuring that they are represented in the halls of power.

We committed ourselves to monitoring this new politician closely. To borrow that old Russian proverb, memorably translated by President Reagan, we endeavored to “trust but verify” – except without the trust part. Who really could trust the proprietor of Trump University, after all?

This report compiles much of Public Citizen’s coverage of Trump’s first year through our traditional lenses of exposing favors to special interests, attempts to undue safeguards, and acts of self-dealing by those in the public’s trust.

Trump Has Fed the Swamp He Pledged to Drain

In the last few weeks of his presidential campaign, Trump debuted a promise to “drain the swamp” in Washington, D.C. His adoring crowds went wild, breaking into frenzied [chants](#) of “drain the swamp, drain the swamp.”

Trump’s devotion to that cause, if it were ever sincerely held, ended as soon as he won the election. Lobbyists swarmed onto his fledgling transition team, which was charged with setting the new administration’s course. Within weeks of the election, we [counted](#) 14 lobbyists on the transition, and several times as many with a business stake in the administration’s policies. This was the embodiment of self-dealing swamp culture that Trump had promised to end.

Questioned by “60 Minutes” about the influx of lobbyists less than a week after the election, Trump [claimed](#) he had no choice because “the whole place is one big lobbyist,” referring to Washington, D.C. Nonetheless, he promised, “We’re going to phase that out.”

The Trump transition team was shamed into issuing a pair of purported lobbyist bans. But these efforts were loophole-ridden, ignored and unenforced, as Public Citizen chronicled in a retrospective on Trump’s [“Unruly Transition.”](#)

Those close to Trump suggested that the president-elect did not take his “drain the swamp” promise seriously. “Drain the swamp is probably somewhere down the bottom,” compared with other Trump priorities, [said](#) Corey Lewandowski, who maintained close ties to Trump even after being fired as his campaign manager.

In reality, instead of presaging a crackdown on lobbyists, Trump’s election spelled opportunity for them.

In June, Public Citizen [calculated](#) that the Trump administration had appointed 133 past or present registered lobbyists to executive branch positions, including 36 who had recently lobbied on issues of direct relevance to their new government posts.

While many lobbyists flowed into the government, people who had worked for the Trump campaign or transition or had other ties to Trump or Vice President Mike Pence rushed to cash in. In October, Public Citizen found that [44 people](#) with connections to Trump or Pence had acted as registered lobbyists by mid-2017. They were associated with billings and in-house lobbying expenditures in the first half of 2017 of nearly \$42 million.

More than 6,200 lobbyists blanketed Capitol Hill to work on tax issues in 2016, as Public Citizen [reported](#) in December.

Trump is not to blame for the army of lobbyists that descended on lawmakers to shape tax policy. Last year’s lobbying bonanza was due to the high financial stakes and extraordinary arcana of the tax code, which offers a ripe target for K Street’s hired guns.

But Trump is to blame for designing a tax overhaul plan that was stacked in favor of corporations and the wealthy, and for countenancing still more giveaways in the final weeks before the legislation was passed. Tax breaks that were slated for elimination were restored and new ones were added. Promises to eliminate absurd loopholes – such as the “carried interest” break for hedge fund and private equity managers that Trump had [previously assailed](#) – were forgotten.

And the harried manner in which the law was written combined with its sunset provisions to dodge budget constraints ensured that it will continue to provide lobbyists with an ongoing feast of billable hours.

“Trump said this was a giant Christmas present to the American people,” one prominent tax lobbyist [said](#). “Well, it’s a giant present to the tax lobbying community as well.”

Another lobbyist added: “If you want to use insurance terms, tax lobbyists just purchased an annuity that will provide benefits for years.”

Trump also is to blame for utterly abandoning his promises on ethics and special interests’ influence. In the closing weeks of the campaign, he issued a [five-point plan](#) to “drain the swamp.” Each of these called for limiting the influence of lobbyists, including passage of legislation to ban former government officials and members of Congress from becoming lobbyists for five years.

Nearly all of these promises remain unfulfilled, and worse, unattempted, as we documented in our [October report](#) on Trump alumni turned lobbyists. *Politico* reached the same conclusion in an [analysis](#) published later that month.

Trump’s promise to “drain the swamp” tapped into a genuine public cynicism about the conduct of those in power. His mockery of his pledges more than validates that their cynicism was well placed.

Trump Has Been the Chief Administrator of Corporations’ Wish Lists

Lobbyists were not the only targets of candidate Trump’s anti-elitist campaign rhetoric. He also attacked hedge fund managers and took frequent shots at Goldman Sachs, the New York investment bank with an uncanny penchant for placing its executives in the highest echelons of the U.S. government.

But, as was the case in his view of lobbyists, Trump’s purported objections to corporate elites evaporated as soon as the election results arrived. Our [Corporate Cabinet](#) project documented that many of Trump’s Cabinet nominees were multimillionaires or billionaires, and that many hailed from the corporate power centers that Trump assailed on the campaign trail. His nominee to be secretary of the Treasury, Stephen Mnuchin, was a former Goldman Sachs executive who later made a fortune by presiding over foreclosures of financial crisis victims’ houses. Trump’s choice for economic adviser, Gary Cohn, moved to the White House directly from serving in the No. 2 job at Goldman Sachs.

In June, we looked at Trump’s subcabinet level nominees. We found that nearly [70 percent](#) of them were previously employed by corporations or corporate representatives. A follow-up piece [tallied](#) 44 administration officials with ties to Charles and David Koch, the billionaire brothers and climate-change deniers who have funded right-wing causes for decades. In 2015, Trump bragged in a [tweet](#) that Koch brothers would not influence him. Subscribers to the axiom “personnel is policy” would conclude otherwise.

In August, we [reported](#) that Trump had held at least 385 meetings with corporate executives since Election Day. In contrast, President Obama held 100 meetings with corporate executives in the first seven years of his administration.

Trump’s mere embrace of corporate leaders was not necessarily a repudiation of his campaign promises. He was auditioning to be the “businessman president,” after all, and had mused that he would appoint various billionaire friends to Cabinet posts. But Trump’s swoon toward billionaires

and CEOs proved indicative of who would be first in line in his administration – and who would be forgotten – when it came to policies, as well as meetings.

Trump Has Sought to Demolish Public Safeguards

On the campaign trail, Trump promised to eliminate 75 percent of regulations. Shortly after assuming office, Trump signed an executive order calling for two regulations to be eliminated for every one issued.

These promises played to an audience that has been plied for years by demagogic GOP claims – religiously parroted on Fox News – that regulations “kill jobs.” In one of the more Orwellian propaganda efforts in recent decades, the GOP rode the “job killing regulations” mantra to retaking control of the U.S. House of Representatives in 2010 even as country was reeling from a financial crisis and that was plainly caused by insufficient regulation.

Until Congress passed the tax overhaul legislation in December, the only legislative accomplishment of any significance that Republicans could claim in the first year of the Trump administration was the passage of 14 bills that canceled rules that were completed late in the Obama administration.

These repeals were approved under an accelerated legislative process known as the Congressional Review Act. While lawmakers voting for these measures would no doubt cling to a fantasy that these rules were somehow burdensome to regular Americans, any summery of their contents lays that fiction bare.

- Congress ended a rule to protect streams from polluting coal mining run-off.
- Congress blocked a rule that would have required employers to keep accurate records of employees’ injuries.
- Congress blocked a rule that would ensure the right of financial institutions’ customers to seek redress for systemic harms through class action litigation.
- Congress stopped a rule that would have prohibited providers of broadband services from selling their personal Internet use data.

“It’s hard to imagine there’s anyone in America, other than those with a direct profit interest in trading private information, who wants Comcast and the rest to have the right to systematically and pervasively invade our privacy,” Public Citizen President Robert Weissman [said](#) following the broadband vote.

These rules rollbacks were favors to corporations and had nothing to do with improving life for regular Americans or elevating small businesses.

In July, the Trump administration released a report on rulemaking activities undertaken by the administration. Office of Management and Budget Director Mick Mulvaney boasted that the

administration had eliminated or stopped 860 regulations. In typical Trump administration form, that claim was an exaggeration, but it was in the neighborhood of the truth.

And then Mulvaney said this: “I got news for you. None of [the halted regulations] are very sexy. None of them are very glamorous. None of them really rise to the level of getting national attention.”

His claim was, essentially, that the regulations the administration blocked would have been harmful to the public’s best interest. Public Citizen was the first organization to [report on](#) the makeup of those halted rulemakings that Mulvaney trivialized. Here’s just a sample:

- The administration blocked a rulemaking that sought to address the hazards that caused the 2010 Upper Big Branch coal mine explosion in West Virginia, which killed 29 miners, and another rule that would have addressed the dangers of combustible dust, which killed 14 people in an explosion last decade.
- It stopped a rule that would have ensured same-sex spouses are afforded equal rights in Medicare participating facilities.
- And it stopped nearly 40 rulemakings that would have protected endangered species and critical habitats.

Separately, the administration has sought to delay a rule that would require financial advisers to act in the best interests of their clients (something that, remarkably, was not previously required) and to protect borrowers from fly-by-night payday lenders.

These are the sorts of protections that benefit just about everyone except for those who would exploit the public or environment for personal gain. History will be the judge on who had the best wishes of the American people at heart.

Trump Has Trampled on Customs for Public Officials to Avoid Self-Dealing

A little over a week before taking the oath of office, Trump claimed that he was turning “over complete and total control” of his business affairs [to his sons](#). He said that he had resigned from his businesses and conveyed all of his assets to a revocable trust.

But a supposed “wall” between Trump and his businesses soon proved to be of papier-mache. Trump’s son Eric acknowledged that Trump’s promise not to discuss his business affairs with his son was [less than airtight](#). Regardless of communications, Trump retained knowledge of his major assets, foreclosing any claim that his was a blind trust. And, most importantly, independent news organizations reported that Trump himself maintained complete control of the revocable trust, and the ability to withdraw money from it whenever he saw fit.

An [explainer](#) by Public Citizen Productions captured the absurdity of Trump’s claims that he separated himself from his businesses.

Trump, who once promised to promptly release his “[very beautiful](#)” tax returns, has famously become the first president in modern history not to disclose his taxes to the public. But as a candidate for office and now officeholder, Trump is covered by certain – albeit insufficient – requirements to release details about his financial affairs.

In September, Public Citizen released a comprehensive analysis of three years of Trump’s disclosures on his assets and liabilities. Our report, [Trump Inc.](#) chronicled that Trump has held stakes in more than [500 businesses](#) and created at least 49 new businesses, many overseas, subsequent to announcing his candidacy for president.

Trump has frequently said that the policies he has promoted on taxes will not benefit him personally. But if Trump is anywhere near as wealthy as he claims, his proposal to eliminate the estate tax would have saved his heirs hundreds of millions of dollars.

In October, we [calculated](#) that a repeal of the estate tax would save the Trump family \$593 million to \$1.4 billion. The families of 15 wealthy Trump administration officials, including Trump, would save somewhere between \$1.7 billion and \$4.1 billion from repeal. Even at the lower end of that range, \$1.7 billion would equal that combined net worth of 18,000 U.S. families of median net worth.

As Congress turned to legislation to overhaul the tax code, populist Trump was back on the stump.

“Our framework includes our explicit commitment that tax reform will protect low-income and middle-income households,” Trump [promised](#). “Not the wealthy and well-connected.”

And he added, “It’s not good for me, believe me.” Trump repeated that claim, [again and again](#).

The tax legislation that Congress passed in December did not eliminate the estate tax, but did double the amount of an estate that is exempt from taxation. The legislation also lowered the top income tax rate and created special carve outs for businesses that operate under a “pass-through” structure (under which business owners pay taxes on their profits on their individual tax return). In short, it did many things that solely benefit wealthy people.

The bill also did things that benefit people a lot like Donald Trump. All of Trump’s 500-plus businesses are believed to be pass-through entities. Until the final days of the tax legislation effort, the “pass-through” carve out was limited only to businesses with significant numbers of employees. But a change at the [last moment](#) permitted the perk to be used by businesses with lots of assets and few employees. That profile fits one industry perfectly: real estate.

Regardless of whether the tax legislation will benefit Trump personally, it categorically will not reduce the tax bills of regular Americans in a substantive way. Most of the benefits from the bill will go to corporations. The benefits to individuals are overwhelmingly stacked toward the wealthy. People making less than \$100,000 will see just modest changes to their tax bill, with the lowest income earners actually coming out [worse off](#), according to the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office.

As for Trump's oft-repeated claim that he would not benefit personally from the legislation? When questioned on that claim after the bill was signed into law, White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders backed away from it. "The bottom line is, a lot of people are going to do really well under this," [she said](#). "The president's an American. This was a tax plan that was meant to benefit all Americans."

We should not be surprised if Trump would seek to alter the nation's tax policy to benefit himself. While most politicians would go out of their way to at least create the appearance that they do not suffer from conflicts of interest, Trump seems to revel in flaunting that he does. He has all but declared an intention to enrich himself from the presidency.

For instance, shortly after being elected president, Trump doubled the membership fee at his Mar-a-Lago Club, to \$200,000, and sharply increased the room fee at his newly opened Washington, D.C., hotel.

Those wishing to ingratiate themselves to the administration have played along.

Public Citizen recently [reported](#) that 64 trade groups, businesses, candidates, foreign governments and political groups have spent money at Trump's properties since his inauguration.

In any other time, this news would shock the conscience. A year into the Trump administration, it reads like business as usual.

Written by Taylor Lincoln, drawing on the work of Rick Claypool, Craig Holman, Mike Tanglis, Alan Zibel and others at Public Citizen.