

Opinion **US politics & policy**

## America is history's most successful failing state

Toxic paralysis at home shows that a nation can be rich yet ungovernable

**EDWARD LUCE**



The US Supreme Court, which is under red America's control for decades to come, has become a second legislature © Fred Schilling, Collection of the Supreme Court of the United States/Reuters

### **Edward Luce** YESTERDAY

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A key sign of a fading power is its currency losing value. Britain, like ancient Rome, could tell you a thing or two about that. By this yardstick America is close to an imperial peak. The euro is too fragmented, and China's yuan too restricted, to threaten King Dollar's primacy. Bitcoin is a pyramid scheme. Yet political science tells us that America is more divided than at any point since the eve of its civil war in the 1850s. Could it be defying the laws of historical gravity — a failing state that outshines its rivals?

The answer is yes, for the time being. A nation can be both rich and ungovernable for long periods. The last country anyone would compare to America is Belgium, which has been dubbed the richest “failed state” in the world. Yet US politics looks more like Belgium's every day.

Unlike the US, Belgium is divided into language blocs, French and Flemish. Such is their mutual mistrust that most decisions are taken locally. Life goes on for months, even years, without a government. What saves Canada from a similar fate is that French-speaking Quebec is too small a part of it.

With one undisputed tongue, America should be free of such paralysis. Yet the cultural divide between blue and red state America is as uncomprehending as any language barrier.

The US separation of powers has gone from being a strength to a weakness. One branch, the US Supreme Court, is now a second legislature, making laws that would be the preserve of elected assemblies elsewhere. Supreme Court justices have life-long tenure and invoke long dead founding fathers to justify their lawmaking. The court is under red America's control for decades to come. Its conservative majority may be taking revenge for the liberal Supreme Court of the 1960s and 1970s, which pioneered "legislating from the bench". Either way, American law is no longer above [politics](#). The court is now rated as low in opinion polls as other institutions.

We will see another display of governing paralysis for the next two years if Democrats lose control of Congress in November's midterm elections. Again, this would be a sign of impotence not strength. A superpower facing national, indeed global, challenges, should not fool itself that Albany or Austin, let alone Little Rock or Springfield, are the appropriate places to take tackle them.

Most of Joe Biden's unexpected success since July — including his vast green energy bill — would be reversed by the next Republican president, whether or not his name is Donald Trump. Hostility between the two Americas has created an existential mindset that has made an albatross of its constitution. It would be easier to convert America into a French-speaking country than amend its constitution.

America's recriminatory camps are far more like Belgium's language groups than, say, Britain's Conservative and Labour voters. No matter how badly a US president does, there is a high floor and a low ceiling on his vote share. Trump got 47 per cent in 2020. In the past couple of weeks alone, Labour's lead over Britain's ruling Conservatives has gone from low teens to more than 30 per cent. Such fluidity is inconceivable in today's US. Yet America's global power has actually been growing in the last year or two.

There are two reasons for this. The first is that the US's rival is doing worse. What is true of the dollar is also true of geopolitics. Xi Jinping's China is no longer the high-growth star of the world economy. Xi is also moving as far as he can from the consent of the governed that is the basis of any durable political consensus. Though China's economy will still overtake America in the coming years, it will be an ageing country beset with internal challenges. Relative to China, the US looks good. That is not saying much except in terms of power, which is relative.

The second reason is Vladimir Putin. Rarely has a hegemon been as blessed with as blundering an enemy as America is with Putin. The Russian autocrat's invasion of Ukraine will go down as one of the most fateful errors in military history —

CRIME will go down as one of the most fatal errors in military history comparable to Napoleon or Hitler's invasion of Russia in winter. At a stroke Putin's aggression has restored the west's sense of itself and the US's role as leader. The fact that Putin's Russia will increasingly be China's problem is an added bonus.

For the time being, America's relative power is ascendant. The risk is that it will succumb to one of its bouts of global triumphalism. That would be misplaced. Its divisions are increasingly susceptible to foreign exploitation via willing local partners. America still bestrides the globe, but its jugular is badly exposed.

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