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Is the US Headed for a Breakdown?



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

The governing structures of the United States seem to be on the verge of some sort of national nervous breakdown. The symptoms are in our face.

The inability of the House Republican majority to elect a speaker, in its 13th round of voting as of this writing, is the latest, most visible sign. A group of hardcore, ideologically committed right-wing representatives has frustrated the bid of Kevin McCarthy to succeed Nancy Pelosi as House speaker. Whatever the outcome, they will extract concessions that will make it difficult to govern the body, and run the federal government as a whole.

A group of staunch fiscal conservatives will hold the upcoming vote to raise the federal debt ceiling hostage, potentially undermining the “full faith and credit” of the U.S. government that has enabled it to vacuum capital from around the world into its supposedly safe Treasury bills. It seems inconceivable they will actually fail to raise the

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limit. But the level of extremism present on the right, seen a year ago in the January 6 Capitol invasion, does not exclude this possibility, or the global financial collapse it will cause. There is a certain burn-it-down nihilism on the right that sees crashing the system as the only way to change it. A Regeneration Through Violence, as historian Richard Slotkin named the first of his trilogy on how U.S. frontier mythology has shaped the country to this day.

Any number of warning lights are flashing on the national dashboard. The U.S. Supreme Court in December heard arguments in a case that might radically expand the power of state legislatures over federal elections. *Moore v Harper* rose from a North Carolina case in which the state supreme court in 2021 threw out an outrageously tilted gerrymander by the state legislature. Republican legislators sued in federal court, arguing what is known as the independent state legislature theory they believe derives from the U.S. Constitution. It would give legislatures near total power to write rules for federal elections, conceivably giving them the power to overturn popular vote results. It appears the justices are not willing to go this far. But some expansion of legislative powers might take place.

Obviously, if legislative action somehow changed the result of a presidential election, it would cause a national meltdown. A substantial element of the Republican Party already believes that that 2020 presidential election was stolen, while many Democrats believe earlier elections including 2000 and 2004 were also thieved. It is likely that whichever party wins the White House in 2024, a large portion of the electorate will consider the occupant illegitimate. That is the recipe for an ungovernable nation.

Centrifugal tendencies

The first two years of the Biden Administration provided some progressive victories, notably climate legislation and marriage equality. But with the new Republican House majority, the former gridlock has reemerged. It may be broken again in 2024. The 2024 electoral landscape gives Republicans strong odds to win a narrow Senate majority, as this analysis shows. If they manage to keep their House majority and win the White House, they would hold power in an undivided government.

But that might only increase the centrifugal tendencies in the U.S., which *The Raven* has covered here and here. It can be argued that the relative ungovernability of the U.S., denying undisputed victory to one side or another, has averted a national breakdown. But if one side gained sufficient power to run the board and enact its full agenda, the results might be so unacceptable to the other side it would cause a de facto split. Consider the

impact of a national abortion ban, either by court ruling or legislation, on blue states. Or of a complete ban on possession of semiautomatic weapons in the red states.

Let me be clear. I do not expect a new 1860s, with the armies marching against each other. But there is a serious danger an old idea will return to the fore, the power of states to nullify federal legislation. In 1832, South Carolina asserted its power to nullify a federal tariff. The agricultural South hated tariffs because it had to import industrial goods, and this gave the North an advantage over cheaper British producers. President Andrew Jackson threatened to send in federal troops. In 1833, South Carolina backed down. The only more recent attempt was by Arkansas to nullify the *Brown v. Board of Education* school desegregation order in 1957. In this case it was overturned by federal troops sent by President Dwight Eisenhower to integrate Little Rock Central High School. A number of states are indeed seeking to nullify federal gun laws. Missouri and Arizona have passed state laws to that effect. Meanwhile, the legalization of recreational and medical marijuana by many states constitutes a form of soft nullification that has not been contested by federal authorities. Many states including Oregon and California are refusing to aid the federal government in enforcing immigration laws, while Texas is taking enforcement into its own hands. In November Texas Gov. Greg Abbott ordered the Texas Rangers and National Guard to step up border enforcement efforts.

Building closer to home

All this speaks to a deeply divided nation with almost irreconcilable differences. We must take seriously the prospect of a breakdown in governance systems in the United States over coming years, and begin to do some scenario planning for what this will mean. At a minimum, it is difficult to retain any optimism for further progressive gains at the federal level over the remainder of this decade. Any gains progressives do make are likely at state and local levels. This makes participation and power building at these levels centrally important, whatever scenario unfolds.

In a case of breakdown of federal authority, we need to consider multi-state alliances to tackle critical issues. We already saw this during the pandemic, when states banded together to fill in Covid response gaps left by the federal government. States are also aligning around climate action, for example along the West Coast. Traditionally, states have collaborated in interstate compacts to manage river basins. These forms of cooperation are likely to grow in importance.

Ultimately, we must build stronger communities and societies closer to home, more in tune with the conditions and limitations of place. Nationalized and globalized economic

and political systems are increasingly dysfunctional and incapable of adequately responding to increasing challenges. Supply chains are breaking down. Marginalized populations are growing. Climate extremes are intensifying, while areas actually hit by them are struggling to rebuild. Global tensions and military spending are increasing, which basic needs such as clean water and affordable housing are crying to be met.

The capture of governance systems by powerful interests serving only their own ends makes it difficult to address these growing problems. Gridlock and breakdown are the outcomes. The same institutions can and do capture local and state governments as well. But closer to home democratic possibilities are greater, and the people power mobilization we need to overcome vested interests is more possible.

In the end, a national political system that no longer works opens the possibilities to create more horizontal arrangements, where institutions at local, state and regional/bioregional scales are empowered to tackle challenges and build societies more amenable to the human spirit and in tune with the nature of which we all are, finally, a part. Let us neither be alarmed or depressed by breakdowns at the national level. Instead, let it be a motivation to build our movements and strength closer to home, to be prepared for whatever might come.

This originally appeared on Patrick Mazza's Substack page, [The Raven](#).

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