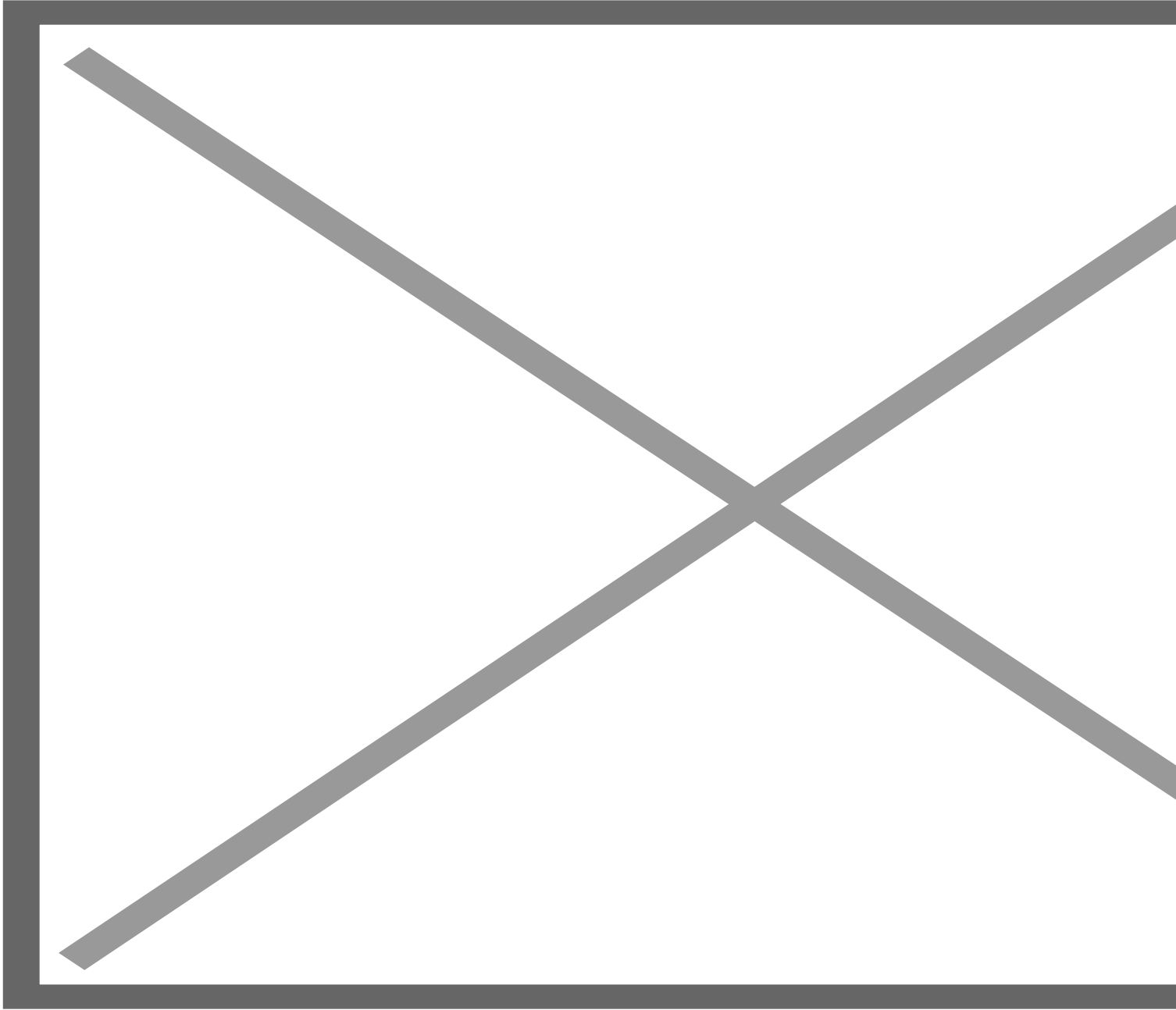


The dangers of institutional neglect

How often do we think about the Holy Roman Empire?

by [Benjamin J. Dueholm](#) in the [May 2026](#) issue

Published on April 14, 2026



Century illustration (Source images: Getty)

The United States is in the middle of a high-stakes election year. Every election for the last decade has felt like an existential crisis, and this one will engage partisans explicitly on those terms. But I find myself obsessing over the Holy Roman Empire, the cobbled-together network of principalities, cities, and bishoprics that covered much of central Europe for nearly a thousand years.

I started thinking about this after two events this winter—events that, while seemingly minor, in fact reveal more about the direction of US politics than any individual election result does. In December, the Democratic National Committee decided to bury a postmortem it commissioned on the 2024 election. And in February, longtime sports commentator and political neophyte Stephen A. Smith briefly teased a possible run in the 2028 Democratic presidential primaries.

Taken together, these are stories of institutional weakness. Reporting at the time suggested that DNC chair Ken Martin was worried about alienating important people and constituencies within the Democratic Party. Assigning responsibility for the 2024 disaster—in which Democrats lost the Senate, failed to retake the House, and lost the presidency to a man it had depicted as a threat to democracy itself—might offend some of the elected officials, campaign professionals, megadonors, advocacy organizations, and media super-users who make up the patchwork of the modern Democratic Party.

This refusal to articulate basic lessons and make plans for future success made the party, the oldest political organization in America, look like the old Holy Roman Empire—the internal dynamics of which, over the course of its existence, always had to be managed by its titular emperors. Keeping the Democratic constituencies happy apparently takes priority over winning elections. A string of wins in off-year and special elections between November and February cooled any interest in introspection within a party that is still closer to extinction as a national entity than it is to gaining control of the presidency, Congress, and the Supreme Court. (Far more senators—44 versus 24—come from states Trump won by double digits all three times than from those where his opponents did the same.)

This institutional incapacity provides a broad opening for charismatic, attention-grabbing entrepreneurs to take over a political party. Smith, whose policy views I never considered and whose sports takes I don't particularly enjoy, does not seem to have been serious about trying to do this. But he's undeniably good at getting attention, which has become a critical asset in US politics. Someone will be able to do it. Strong enough midterm results will probably steer the party toward normal standard-bearers in 2028. But disappointing results will expose the party as a disabled ship waiting to be boarded from outside.

That's what happened to the Republican Party after 2012. The RNC commissioned (and released) an "autopsy" with recommendations the party leaders and media outriders would not accept. With the party establishment frozen between innovation it wouldn't grasp and an orthodoxy that couldn't win, a reality TV star with a nonpolitical public image was able to attack it simultaneously from the left (on Social Security and Medicare) and the right (on immigration), taking it over more swiftly than anyone thought possible. The party has, ever since, been shaped around the impulses and beliefs of that one individual.

This tension between institutions and outsiders is long familiar in denominational Christianity. Our central institutions have presided over generations of decline. But rather than coming to a consensus on the causes of that decline or what might change its trajectory, our most poisonous and painful conflicts this century have been over distributing its cost. We, too, tend to be Holy Roman Empires composed of congregations, regional judicatories, national staffs, publishing houses, seminaries, parachurch organizations, and recognized ministries, with no clear lines of authority or accountability and an overwhelming priority of not rocking boats. Somehow the path of least resistance ends up being to preserve things like jurisdictions and seminaries and to shed less protected functions like camps and campus ministries, rather than consolidating for sustainability and organizing

for mission.

That's not to say that people in those roles aren't doing their best or that no hard decisions are being made. But the difficulty of really leading these denominations has left them open to entrepreneurs and improvisers willing to work outside of, and even against, the institutions around which the church has long been organized. Congregations become freelancers. Charismatic individuals build followings alongside or beyond church bodies. Good ideas and best practices tend to be diffuse and sporadically adopted rather than coordinated and consistent. In a political duopoly, a party in long-term crisis will still be able to snap back thanks to short-term trends. But the evolution of America's religious landscape shows us what happens when institutional neglect and drift continue unchecked.

If some kind of Christian revival is stirring in America—a possibility I considered in [my January column](#)—our institutions are not particularly well situated to cultivate or harness it. Congregations and other ministries that do try to harness it will have strong incentives to pull away from centralizing organizations rather than deepen their participation.

As someone who has never tried to organize for political or religious cooperation and solidarity, I view this process with grief and trepidation. Being bound together by shared histories, agreed-upon procedures, and programs is valuable in itself. But the biggest threats to these bonds no longer come from dissension or dissatisfaction within. Everyone seems to agree that these structures have not served us particularly well, whether they diagnose the failure primarily as doctrinal laxity, cultural dysfunction, missional drift, racism, sexism, or anything else. And when the structures aren't serving whatever missions we imagine for them, money and energy will flow elsewhere.

The Holy Roman Empire had a good run. It emerged for understandable reasons and served useful purposes. It outlasted many other polities. But its decline was evident before the battle of Austerlitz finally brought it to an end. Every Holy Roman Empire has a Napoleon coming for it.

Ben Dueholm chats with the *Century's* community engagement editor Jon Mathieu about the struggles institutions face.

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