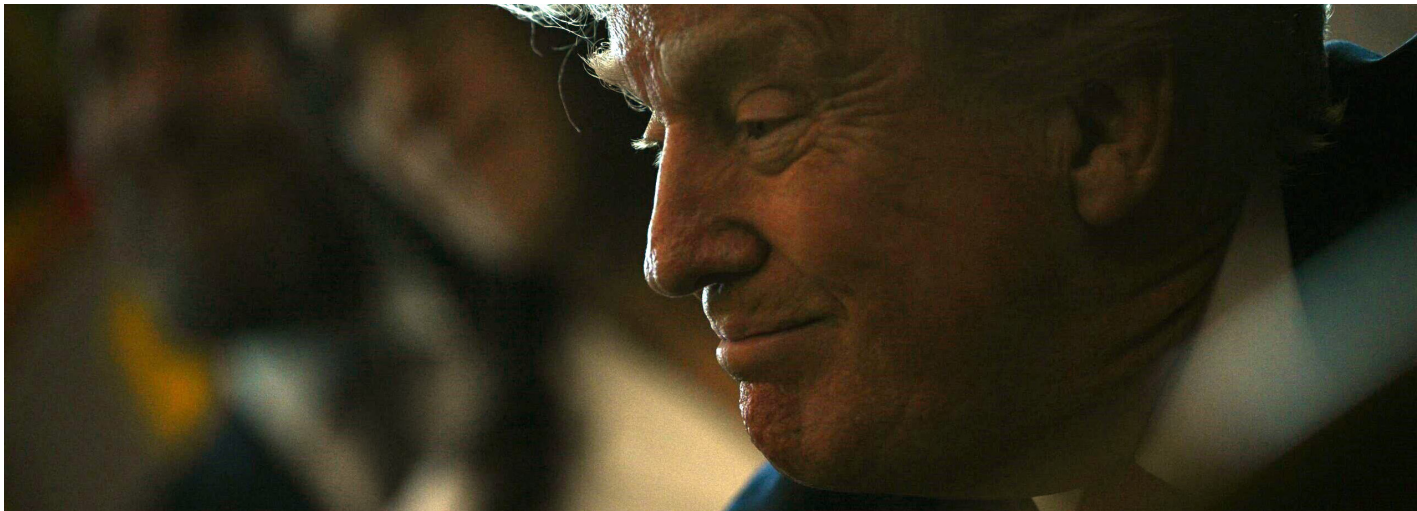




The Cracks in Trump's Armour



by Riccardo Alcaro

- During his first year in office, Trump solidified an image of 'perpetual victory' by enforcing tariffs, brokering Middle Eastern ceasefires, and weaponising the government against opponents.
- Yet his armour began to crack as hiring cooled and affordability issues fuelled a string of Republican electoral losses.
- Trump's charismatic grip failed when a MAGA revolt forced him not to block the release of the Epstein files, proving his base is no longer unconditionally loyal.

Since returning to office, Donald Trump has enjoyed a remarkable winning streak. His run of successes has reinforced the image of a politically dominant president, even accounting for the occasional setbacks. However, almost a year into his second term, cracks in the president's armour are beginning to show that his **bombastic rhetoric** of perpetual victory can obscure but not entirely conceal.

Winning streak

In foreign policy, Trump has imposed tariffs on most of the world without triggering significant retaliation – with the notable exception of China, with which he was ultimately forced into a difficult and incomplete compromise. He has also presided over a series of ceasefires that have



strengthened his reputation as a peace-maker, from Gaza to the Israel-Iran war and, in his view at least, conflicts in Africa, the Caucasus and Southeast Asia. He has succeeded in shifting a much larger share of the burden of Ukraine's defence onto European allies, even as he has so far failed to reach any accommodation with a Russia that continues to cling to unabashedly maximalist positions.

In recent weeks, a series of developments has revealed latent vulnerabilities in Trump's presidency.

It is, however, on the domestic front that Trump's governing action has appeared most far-reaching. The president has **curtailed** Congress's authority over federal spending; **dismantled** significant parts of the federal administration, deeply unsettling its workforce; and eliminated or **subordinated** to the White House regulatory and oversight agencies that had been designed as independent from Congress. He has brought the Department of Justice to heel, **pursued** the prosecution of political opponents, and at the same time pardoned his own supporters, including the 6 January 2021 insurrectionists.

Trump has **pressured** the media through lawsuits, threats to revoke licenses and cuts to subsidies; used the withholding of federal funds to **force** universities to align with a conservative agenda; and **intimidated** law firms involved in cases disliked by the administration.

He has also **deployed** federal troops to cities and states governed by Democrats under the pretext of protecting Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents engaged in often arbitrary raids; **narrowed** the enforcement of civil-rights legislation in the name of fighting woke ideology and diversity, equity and inclusion policies; and **promised** a crackdown

on progressive NGOs in response to the murder of far-right activist Charlie Kirk, initially – and without evidence – blamed on left-wing groups.

In recent weeks, however, a series of developments has revealed latent vulnerabilities in Trump's presidency. This does not mean that Trump has already become a lame duck, as too hastily claimed by some. It does suggest though that his power is not unrestrained and that the political margins sustaining his support appear to be narrowing rather than expanding, leaving the president more exposed.

Economic anxieties

The first warning signs concern the economy. **Inflation**, while moderate in aggregate terms, remains elevated for energy and food, keeping the cost of living uncomfortably high. The problem is compounded by housing costs – **rents** and **home** prices alike – and, looking ahead, by health-insurance expenses. The labour market has cooled noticeably: **unemployment** stands at 4.6 per cent, the highest level in four years; hiring has **slowed**; and the government has eliminated hundreds of thousands of **federal jobs**. **Growth** remains relatively solid (2 per cent), but it is driven almost entirely by the boom in a single sector – **artificial intelligence** – which is itself subject to the risk of an abrupt deflation.

Tariff revenues have partially offset the budget hole created by tax cuts for corporations and high-income earners. They nonetheless remain a regressive fiscal tool that weighs disproportionately on lower-income households and risks slowing the economy over time. Unsurprisingly, the Administration has been forced to roll back tariffs on some **food items**, allocate 12 billion US dollars in subsidies to **farmers** – among the hardest hit by the trade squeeze – and plan a direct one-shot 2,000 US dollar transfer to **households**. At the same time, Republican opposition to extending federal **health-insurance subsidies** introduced under



Barack Obama and expanded by Joe Biden is set to double or even triple premiums for millions of Americans, potentially pushing **between ten and twelve million people** out of coverage altogether.

Further compounding the uncertainty is a pending legal challenge regarding the constitutionality of Trump's tariffs. Should the Supreme Court rule that the president overstepped his authority – as it appeared **inclined to do** during the initial hearing – his entire economic agenda would be left in limbo.

Electoral defeats

This economic backdrop goes a long way toward explaining the string of electoral defeats Republicans have suffered in recent months. In early November, Democrats outperformed expectations in the **New York** mayoral race, in the gubernatorial contests in **New Jersey** and **Virginia**, in down-ballot races in **Georgia**, **Pennsylvania** and **Mississippi**. They have also prevailed by a huge margin in a **California** referendum that will allow Governor Gavin Newsom to redraw congressional districts for the House of Representatives – a direct and symmetrical response to the redistricting pushed through in **Texas** at Trump's behest. Democrats then went on to win the mayoralty of **Miami**, while Republicans held onto a House seat in an ultra-conservative **Tennessee** district by margins far narrower than in 2024.

Taken together, these results show not only that Republicans are less competitive when Trump himself is not on the ballot, but also that Democratic voters are highly motivated to mobilise against what they perceive as a semi-authoritarian drift in federal governance. They also point to growing dissatisfaction among segments of the electorate that shifted rightward in 2024, particularly among **Latino men**.

It is therefore unsurprising that Trump's approval rating languishes in the **low forties**.

Public discontent focuses primarily on the **economy**, but it also extends to **immigration**: while there is broad support for tougher restrictions, there is no comparable backing for

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the arbitrary methods that have accompanied the most radical measures, such as raids carried out by masked and unbadged ICE agents that have ensnared not only undocumented migrants but also legal residents and **US citizens**.

Conservative discontent

For the first time, dissatisfaction is also surfacing within the Republican Party itself, which until now has functioned largely as a compliant echo chamber for the Administration. Speaker **Mike Johnson** has been criticised by his own ranks for refusing to convene the chamber during the prolonged government shutdown, while lawmakers from swing districts openly fear the political **fallout** from rising health-insurance premiums during next year's mid-term elections. In **Indiana**, Republicans have refused to follow Trump's orders to redraw electoral districts in violation of state rules, in a rare display of institutional integrity and independence.

Even more significant are the emerging fractures between Trump and the **MAGA movement**. One source of irritation, originating from the isolationist instincts of the base, is a foreign policy perceived as insufficiently America First, too closely aligned with the interests of Trump's family and associates through deals with the **Arab Gulf dynasties**, and excessively tilted in favour of **Israel**. This stance has given space to the most openly antisemitic wing of the American far right, with Nick Fuentes as its youngest and most vocal representative, to fuse criticism of Israel with its racist worldview, thus



creating a **bitter rift** with conservative Zionists. Another source of discontent is renewed military interventionism, first against **Iran** and now potentially toward **Venezuela**.

Still, divisions over foreign policy concern right-wing pundits and MAGA opinion-shapers rather than ordinary voters, who still **like** Trump's extractive approach to foreign policy. The truly destabilising political clash has revolved around Trump's attempt to block the release of the **Epstein files**. Jeffrey Epstein, the financier and convicted sex offender who died in jail in what was officially ruled a suicide, has become a central figure in the conspiracy theories that animate the far right – though the case is indeed fraught with a multitude of shadowy aspects. White House pressure to prevent disclosure escalated into an open confrontation with Representative **Marjorie Taylor Greene** of Georgia, until then one of Trump's most loyal allies and a MAGA standard-bearer, whom Trump publicly disavowed and branded a traitor.

Although Greene has announced that she will leave Congress in January, citing the climate of threats and intimidation she faced, her rebellion – joined by a small group of MAGA lawmakers – proved decisive given the Democrats' unanimous consensus on releasing the files. For the first time, Trump was forced to **back down** on an issue of symbolic importance to his base. The House ultimately approved to make the Epstein files public, with only a single dissenting voice. It was the first clear sign that Trump's charismatic grip on his base has weakened.

To be sure, it may yet prove to be an isolated episode. But the president can no longer be certain that his supporters would follow him under any circumstances – even, to borrow his own once-famous hyperbole, if he were to shoot someone on New York's Fifth Avenue.

18 December 2025

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ISSN 2532-6570

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