Call for Papers
IACFS Meeting, Philadelphia, USA, October 25-27, 2023
Hosted by the Center for the Study of Federalism

Meeting Theme

The Health of Democracy in Federal Political Systems:
Consolidating, Thriving, or Backsliding?

Given widespread concern about democratic backsliding worldwide, we invite papers employing various perspectives and methodologies to examine and explain whether and why democracy is or is not consolidating, thriving, or backsliding in your center’s country or in multiple federal countries under analysis. The recent assaults on the U.S. Capitol and on federal offices in Brasília by angry mobs and the rise of religious nationalism, right-wing populism, and inter-group in some federal countries highlight concerns about democracy’s health.

Democratic backsliding is not well defined but is usually taken to mean the weakening or destroying of the democratic characteristics of a political system that push the system towards autocratic or authoritarian rule, even while elections remain in place. There is no consensus on the causes of backsliding. Commonly cited causes include (1) elite and populist assaults on democratic norms and processes by various forces and (2) power-grabbing executives who undermine and manipulate the rule of law; neutralize countervailing institutions (such as packing the courts and building a loyal military); manipulate, corrupt, and sometimes refuse to accept the results of central, regional, and/or local elections; punish opposition regional and local governments; dismantle independent media; and centralize power with the aid of certain parties and interests that support executive dominance. In federal systems, there are the possibilities of democratic enclaves in an otherwise authoritarian system and authoritarian enclaves in an otherwise democratic system. Another question is whether democratic or autocratic constituent governments arrest or facilitate systemwide democratic backsliding.

However, some federal democracies are thriving, while others are consolidating democratic governance. Further, the backsliding literature is often imprecise in its measurement of democracy and of forward or backward change. Many measures, moreover, depend on subjective coding by not necessarily unbiased observers. The conference papers, therefore, offer opportunities to measure the health of democracy in federal political systems more empirically through case studies and multi-country analyses.
Focusing on consolidating, thriving, and backsliding federal systems will help us to better identify the constitutional, institutional, political, cultural, and socioeconomic variables that support or weaken robust democracy in federal systems. After the conference, we propose to publish a volume of pertinent papers.

Please send your paper proposal (200-300 words) to J. Wesley Leckrone at jwleckrone@widener.edu no later than 22 May 2023. We look forward to receiving your proposal and seeing you at the 2023 IACFS meeting.

The conference will be held at the DoubleTree Hotel, 237 South Broad Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA. Details on registration for the conference will be forthcoming.

Please note: The conference will be entirely in-person with no virtual options for presentations or attendance.

John Kincaid and J. Wesley Leckrone, Center for the Study of Federalism