

From Shades to Fragments – US Federal Democracy Today with Prof. Jared Sonnicksen & Rep. Sage Dixon, 9 February 2021

The United States of America are the oldest federal country in the world. They have inspired many other countries to choose federal governance, and have played a major role in installing federal structures in states such as Germany, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Iraq.

Yet, US federalism has become more polarised and more fragmented. In US history, there has always been an inherent tension between federalism and democracy. Up until 1860, federalism was used as the justification by Southern States to continue Slavery, while up until the 1960s, it was also used by the same Southern States in order to continue the discrimination and exclusion of African Americans from much of the public space. As the US federal government became more dominant in the debates with Southern States (up to sending the national guard to ensure the integration of the school system), and the party system became more nationalized, further frictions appeared in the relationship between federalism and democracy.

Conflicts between the States, especially those governed by a different party than the President, and the US federal government have become more common in recent years. Even discussions about the appointment of Supreme Court judges and spending on health care result in deep divisions and further fractionalisation of US politics.

The strict division of powers, rather than power-sharing have increased conflicts between different levels of government, and have been at the heart of the move from cooperative to coercive federalism, and the most recent turn to ‘uncooperative federalism’ under former President Trump. Yet, President Trump is not responsible for this development, although under his rule many of the existing frictions and conflicts increased. Instead, a political system that is more than 200 years old and has not been fundamentally been reformed, as well as an increasingly polarised party system explain these frictions in US politics. What is more, in the absence of wider institutional reform and unlikely de-polarization of the party system, it can be expected that increased tensions and frictions will continue to dominate US politics for years to come – a trend that is independent from who and which party controls the White House in Washington D.C.

Soeren Keil, 50 Shades of Federalism