



When Democracy Weakens, Fair Government Follows

New Rutgers SPAA Research Shows How Democratic Decline Erodes Professional Public Service

Practical Takeaways

A professional government is the “silent guardian” of our daily lives from clean water to safe roads.

To keep it that way, we need:

- **Firewalls, Not Trapdoors:** We must protect the laws that prevent politicians from firing experts for political reasons.
- **Participation is Protection:** Voting and civic engagement aren’t just about outcomes — they help preserve fair administration.
- **Transparency:** Support think tanks and student researchers who keep a spotlight on how our state actually functions.

SOURCE:

Ibañez, D., & Bello-Gómez, R. A. (2025). *Merit and impartiality in public administration: The effect of democratic backsliding through participation and contestation*. Policy Studies.

EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW: The Hidden Engine of Democracy

We often focus on the visible parts of democracy—elections, campaigns, and political debates. But the real strength of democratic governance lies in something quieter: the professional civil servants who implement laws and deliver public services.

New research from Rutgers University’s David Ibañez (PhD candidate, political science) and Ricardo Bello-Gomez (assistant professor, SPAA) examines 85 countries over more than two decades (1996–2022) and finds that when democratic institutions weaken, the professional foundations of government begin to erode as well. Specifically, democratic backsliding is associated with declines in merit-based hiring and impartial decision-making in public administration. Attempting to align public officials with their specific policy agenda, political leaders with authoritarian aims target and weaken public administration.

Importantly, the study finds that the largest deterioration occurs early—during the transition from mild institutional erosion to deeper democratic weakening—rather than after democracy fully collapses. These findings highlight the importance of protecting the professional civil service before institutional damage becomes difficult to reverse.

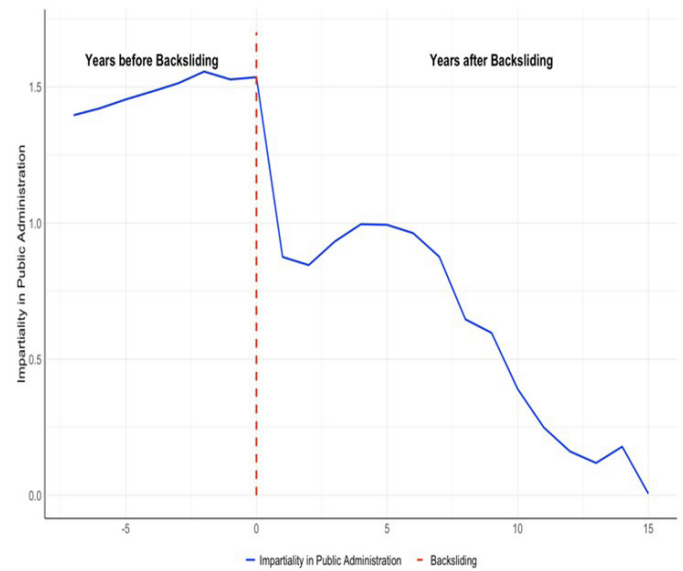
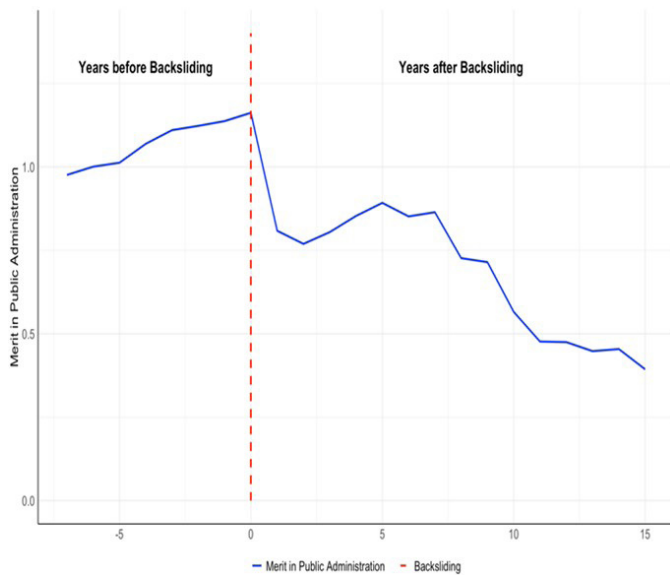
The Two Pillars of a Working State

Most people rarely think about the bureaucracy unless something goes wrong. Yet two fundamental principles ensure that government services remain reliable, fair, and effective.

- **Merit** means that public employees are hired and promoted based on their skills, expertise, and professional qualifications. When hiring decisions

prioritize competence rather than political loyalty or personal connections, governments perform better, policies are implemented more effectively, and corruption becomes less likely.

- **Impartiality** means that government officials apply rules consistently and fairly to everyone. Whether someone is wealthy or poor, politically connected or not, or affiliated with a particular political party, government services should be delivered according to the same standards.



Why It Matters for the United States and New Jersey

In recent years, the United States has experienced a decline in the quality of its democratic process. This has been attested by different international indicators, including Varieties of Democracy's Liberal Democracy Index which is used in this study. Moreover, the country has seen growing debates over civil service reform, including proposals to expand executive authority over career officials, reclassify professional roles into politically controlled positions, and increase political influence over regulatory enforcement.

Supporters argue that stronger executive control improves accountability and policy implementation. Critics warn that expanding political influence over career officials risks politicizing the civil service.

As professor Bello-Gomez states "by upholding merit and impartiality, a professional bureaucracy assures that public services are properly delivered regardless of political allegiance".

While this phenomenon has been studied mainly at the country level, there are also substantial differences in the quality of democracy and public administration across states. For states like New Jersey, maintaining healthy political competition and a competent civil service is critical for consistent governance and service delivery.

Key Findings

1. Democratic weakening reduces bureaucratic professionalism.

2. The largest institutional damage occurs early.

3. Different democratic processes protect different parts of government.

- Political competition helps sustain merit-based recruitment because competing leaders want capable administrators that serve as a guarantee of effective public service.

- Citizen participation helps maintain impartial government services by increasing accountability and public scrutiny.

4. Once institutional erosion becomes severe, the professional bureaucracy is often already weakened and becomes coopted by the authoritarian regime.

Bottom Line

Democracy isn't just about the ballot box; it's about the skills and fairness of the person behind the government desk the next day.