

# Reply to Fiscella: Why study erosion now? And why these risk factors?

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We are grateful to ref. 1 for his interest in our study (2) and welcome the opportunity to respond to some of his questions here. Regarding our focus on the past 25 y, that period witnessed a distinct uptick in instances of erosion. In earlier decades, threats to democracy tended to take the form of military coups, quite a different animal. We were interested in explaining this uptick and why it has affected some democracies but not others. A secondary consideration was data quality, which, for several key variables, is much better in recent years.

Regarding the sparseness of our statistical models, we have undertaken some exploratory work, not reported on in our paper, using other variables, including corruption. The corruption measure we examined is highly correlated with the state capacity measure reported in the text (correlation coefficient: 0.73), and the two variables behave very similarly in our models. As noted in the paper, we did not find robust associations between state capacity and the risk of democratic erosion; the same holds for corruption.

Again regarding our statistical models, Fiscella observes, “The finding that only three variables predict democratic erosion is striking.” This observation leads us to offer a few words of clarification. Our structural, cross-national analysis reveals a handful of factors that increase the risk of democratic erosion, most robustly and notably, income inequality. The finding is significant, not least in that it helps make sense of the erosion of democracy in the wake of a period of globalization and deregulation, and in some surprising parts of the world, such as the United States.

Yet our identification of these structural factors does not amount to a full explanation of the 21st-century wave of backsliding. As Stokes shows in related work, going back to

the 1980s, economic and societal changes shifted the incentives faced by political parties, inducing legacy leftist parties to broaden their constituencies to university-educated city dwellers and thus dilute their identities as working-class parties. Legacy conservative parties, in turn, remained steadfastly opposed to social spending. These developments opened the door to a new breed of right-wing ethnonationalist parties, which in many countries courted left-behind voters and, in some cases, undermined democracy.

Space does not permit us to sketch the distinct path to democratic backsliding of highly unequal countries in the Global South. Our general point, however, is that the identification of income inequality as a risk factor in democratic erosion points researchers toward more complex economic and political processes which end up, in many instances, in a deterioration of democracy.

With regard to developing policy prescriptions to halt or reverse erosion, we agree that an important next step is to conduct further research on the various mechanisms that link inequality to erosion. Polarization is one such mechanism; but as our analyses show, polarization alone does not tell the full story of the connection between inequality and erosion.

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The authors declare no competing interest.

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1. K. Fiscella, Research needed on tipping points and reversal of erosions in democracy. *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A.* **122**, e2500631122 (2025).

2. E. G. Rau, S. Stokes, Income inequality and the erosion of democracy in the twenty-first century. *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A.* **122**, e2422543121 (2025).