

Inequality and Democratic Erosion*

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Abstract

Inequality has long been viewed as a threat to democracy, though statistical studies have shown mixed results. We study the role of income inequality and other structural factors in *democratic erosion* or *backsliding*: situations in which presidents or prime ministers undermine the institutions of their democracies. We demonstrate with cross-national data that income inequality is a highly robust risk factor in the current wave of erosion. Wealthy democracies are less robustly protected from backsliding, and long-lived democracies are not any less likely than new ones to backslide. An implication of our model is that relatively wealthy but unequal and eroding democracies, like the United States, are not outliers. Our study points to adverse political consequences of the growing inequality that many countries have experienced in recent decades.

Full paper forthcoming

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