On the Conceptualization and Measurement of Democratic Crisis

Jørgen Møller
Professor, PhD
Aarhus University
jm@ps.au.dk
&
Svend-Erik Skaaning
Professor, PhD
Aarhus University
skaaning@ps.au.dk

Claims about a global crisis of democracy have become increasingly prominent, yet existing measurement strategies rest on vague definitions and unsubstantiated indicator sets. Recurring patterns of inferential problems — ranging from superficial crisis discourse and single-indicator studies to ambitious but overly inclusive frameworks — conflate democratic malaise with situations in which the regime itself is genuinely at risk. This paper presents a more disciplined framework for conceptualizing and measuring democratic crisis, understood as a high-risk inflection point threatening the core institutions of electoral democracy. The framework distinguishes three independent components. Level captures the fulfilment of constitutive democratic institutions, which reflects the structural immune capacity of the regime. Hazard Intensity captures behavioral pressures — violations of institutional restraint and mutual toleration — grounded in liberal political theory's twin concerns with un-checked power and the suppression of pluralism. Hazard Trend captures the recent trajectory of these pressures. Their combination generates a typology of democratic configurations — consolidated, under stress, fragile, and crisis — with the trajectory as a key modifier. We illustrate the framework using comparative data on contemporary OECD countries. The resulting indices reveal substantial variation in institutional immunity, hazard intensity, and hazard trend, and demonstrate that widely used alternative indicators – voter turnout, vote share of populist parties, and mass-level attitudes regarding institutional trust, and satisfaction with and support for democracy — capture democratic malaise or subsystem stress rather than regime-threatening dynamics. The framework provides a transparent, conceptually grounded basis for assessing democratic risk without conflating any kind of pressure on democratic institutions or subsystems with genuine crisis.

Paper presented at the Demscore conference, Gothenburg, June 8-9, 2026.

Democracy is widely described as being under pressure: in media reporting, political commentary, and scholarly debate. This is also reflected in a growing number of public events, reports, and publications devoted to diagnosing the crisis of democracy (Chou 2015), including Freedom House's Freedom of the World Report 2018 with the subtitle *Democracy in Crisis*. However, the meaning of "democratic crisis" remains strikingly unclear in public debates and scholarship alike. Crisis has become an expansive label associated with a wide range of symptoms, including:

> high levels of citizen disaffection with politics; the gross lack of political literacy; low levels of satisfaction and trust in governments and politicians; the decline in membership of political parties; the increasing power of actors without electoral accountability, such as transnational institutions, central banks, or regulatory bodies; the failure, or ineffectiveness, of representation; and the proliferation of complex governance arrangements that evade accountability and transparency. (Ercan & Gagnon 2014: 1; citations removed)

Used in this way, the concept risks losing analytical precision, conflating dissatisfaction, participation, effectiveness, institutional change, and regime threatening dynamics. The result is a debate in which democracy is frequently said to be in crisis without a clear specification of what is at stake and what warrants this diagnosis.

This ambiguity is mirrored in existing empirical approaches, which rely on sets of indicators that are overly broad (e.g., Armingeon & Guthmann 2014; Katz 2022; Kriesi 2020; Merkel 2018; Moisés 2019). We identify three recurring patterns of inferential error, ranging from superficial crisis discourse to focus on singular indicators and theoretically ambitious but over-inclusive composite frameworks.

These problematic measurement strategies obscure important distinctions between democracies that are structurally weak, democracies facing acute pressure, and democracies experiencing episodic turbulence, disengagement, dissatisfaction, or bad performance without it threatening regime survival. Democracy cannot and should not be equated with the absence of these and other similar political developments. It is rather a system that institutionalizes conflict through competitive elections (Przeworski 1999). Diagnosing crisis therefore requires attention to whether core democratic institutions themselves are under serious threat.

On this basis, we argue that progress in assessing democratic crisis requires greater conceptual discipline and a more discriminating measurement strategy. We conceptualize democratic crisis as a high-risk inflection point in which the defining institutions of the electoral core of democracy, that is, free and fair elections and the protection of political liberties, are threatened in ways that make regime breakdown a plausible outcome. This definition distinguishes crisis from small-scale erosion, political dissatisfaction, and pressure on other features of the political system, and reserves the term for situations in which the democratic regime itself is at risk of fundamental transformation.

To capture this conceptual re-grounding of democratic crisis, we propose a framework that distinguishes between three analytically independent components. The first component, Level, captures the extent to which core democratic institutions are currently fulfilled and reflects the structural strength, or immune capacity, of a political regime. The second component, Hazard Intensity, captures the intensity of contemporary pressures that strain these institutions, focusing on behavioral challenges by key actors rather than background conditions or public attitudes, and grounded in liberal political theory's twin concerns with unchecked power and the suppression of pluralism (Holmes 1995). The third component, Hazard Trend, captures the recent trajectory of these pressures, indicating whether democratic strain is intensifying or receding.

Together, these components allow for a more fine-grained diagnosis of democratic vulnerability than approaches that treat crisis as a single latent condition. Their combination generates a typology of democratic configurations – consolidated, under stress, fragile, and crisis – that clarifies when the crisis threshold is reached and how Hazard Trend modifies the diagnosis. The three-component design resonates with recent contributions to the democratic resilience literature, which similarly distinguish between institutional capacity and exposure to destabilizing pressures (Boese et al. 2021; Croissant & Lott 2025).

The framework is diagnostic rather than predictive; it is designed to identify institutional weaknesses, exposure to destabilizing forces, and their recent dynamics, not to provide a concise forecast of the timing or likelihood of democratic breakdown. A key implication is that democracies with similar institutional baselines may face very different risks depending on their exposure to hazard and the direction of recent change. We therefore treat the three components as distinct diagnostic dimensions rather than collapsing them into a composite crisis index.

The empirical sections illustrate this framework on current OECD countries. These are among the world's oldest and most affluent democracies, and if crisis dynamics are observable within this group, where theory-based expectations of stability are high (Cornell et al. 2020), this constitutes particularly strong evidence of regime vulnerability.

By clarifying what constitutes a democratic crisis and by aligning conceptual distinctions with a transparent measurement strategy, the paper aims to improve the precision and credibility of empirical crisis diagnoses. Rather than asking whether democracy is in crisis in general, it provides tools for identifying when and where democratic institutions face elevated and potentially escalating risks, and for distinguishing regime-threatening dynamics from broader stress signs. It also demonstrates empirically that widely used alternative indicators – including voter turnout, party fragmentation, institutional trust, and satisfaction with democracy – capture democratic malaise or subsystem stress rather than the behavioral dynamics that directly threaten electoral democracy.

The concept of democratic crisis

Crisis as decisive turning point: reclaiming analytical precision

The concept of crisis is often employed in a loose and casual way, with little regard for its etymological roots or traditional usage. While it is not necessary to be bound by a concept's original meaning – the so-called 'etymological fallacy' rightly cautions against this assumption (Baggini 2003: 7) – constant redefinition can hinder the goal of cumulative research. A brief review of the term's etymology highlights how the use of crisis in sociology and political science has become, as Wolfgang Merkel (2018: 12) puts it, "nothing short of inflationary."

Like democracy, the term crisis comes from classical Greek, where it meant something like a 'decision', specifically in the sense of rendering a judgment or delivering a verdict. In this original usage, crisis signified a decisive turning point, involving stark choices between alternatives such as just or unjust, right or wrong, or even life or death (Koselleck 2006 [1982]: 358). This original meaning carried over most powerfully into medical science, where crisis designated the moment at which a patient would either recover or die – a decisive juncture that demanded accurate diagnosis and prompt judgment. Galen's influential formulation distinguished between acute and chronic crises: the former involving a sharp, decisive turning point, the latter a protracted condition whose outcome remained uncertain. Both usages shared

the structural feature that crisis was a threshold concept, not a description of a state. It referred to a moment of heightened risk at which the normal functioning of the organism was genuinely imperiled (Koselleck 2006 [1982]).

These features – decisional urgency, genuine alternatives, and the possibility of terminal outcomes – migrated into political and social language from the seventeenth century onward. They were preserved in the early social science literature on democratic stability, which treated crisis as a situation in which the survival of the political regime was genuinely at stake (Svensson 1986: 133). This meaning, however, has been gradually crowded out. The concept gained renewed momentum in the 1970s, when commentators from both the political right and left began proclaiming democracy to be in crisis – sometimes for diametrically opposite reasons. From a conservative perspective, Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki (1975) diagnosed the problem as based on demand overload from increasingly assertive citizens. In contrast, left-leaning theorists such as Claus Offe (1972) and Jürgen Habermas (1975) identified a legitimation crisis rooted in insufficient citizen participation and declining trust in democratic institutions. In retrospect, both camps clearly overstated the severity of the crisis signs they identified. Political developments in established democracies of North America and Western Europe in the 1970s did not represent a genuine inflection point at which democratic regimes faced a real risk of breakdown (Svensson 1986; Merkel 2016).

The result has been a progressive inflation of the term. As Koselleck (2006 [1982]: 399) observes, "The concept of crisis, which once had the power to pose unavoidable, harsh and non-negotiable alternatives, has been transformed to fit the uncertainties of whatever might be favored at a given moment." In contemporary academic and public debate, crisis is applied to developments as varied as declining party membership, low institutional trust, voter disengagement, and authoritarian backsliding, even though these phenomena differ fundamentally in their implications for regime survival. This ambiguity is not merely semantic; a concept that encompasses both dissatisfaction with democratic outputs and the active subversion of democratic institutions cannot discriminate between genuine emergencies and the normal pressures that democracies routinely absorb and survive.

We therefore advocate a return to the traditional understanding of crisis, in which the phenomenon at stake faces a real risk of breakdown or fundamental transformation. This view is echoed by Przeworski (2019: 10), who defines crisis as "situations in which the condition under the status quo institutions is some kind of a disaster," adding crucially that "no change

occurs, but it may." The last part captures precisely what distinguishes crisis from mere challenge or decline; crisis is a threshold at which breakdown becomes a plausible outcome, not merely a distant theoretical possibility. By recovering this threshold quality, the concept regains the analytical precision required to distinguish genuine democratic emergencies from the broad range of pressures and challenges that democracies routinely face.

The electoral core as the anchor

Having established what crisis means, we turn to the second definitional question: what must be at risk for a situation to qualify as a democratic crisis? Our answer is that the threatened entity must be the electoral core of democracy, namely, the set of institutional features that, in combination, make democracy what it is as a regime type: free and fair elections with inclusive suffrage and respect for political liberties (freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly), closely resembling Dahl's (1989: 221) understanding of polyarchy. Only if this core is in jeopardy can we say that democracy faces a life-and-death situation.

This choice rests on three interconnected arguments (Møller & Skaaning 2024: Ch. 1-2). First, there is broad agreement that the electoral element forms the uncontested core of modern representative democracy, which is otherwise an essentially contested concept (Gallie 1956). A minimal definition gives democracy a clear meaning that is distinct from neighboring concepts; it links the concept to its original understanding – rule by the people – via a focus on the procedures that determine access to executive and legislative power (Schumpeter (1972 [1942]: 269) and enable peaceful power transfers via competitive elections (Popper 1999 [1987]: 94). Virtually all theoretical traditions – from thin procedural to thick substantivist accounts – take elections as their starting point. Second, there is fierce disagreement over what should be added to the electoral minimum, and this disagreement itself provides a powerful reason for anchoring crisis diagnosis at the uncontroversial minimum. Each addition may be normatively defensible from some vantage point, but each also introduces contested standards against which crisis can be diagnosed. The more features incorporated as definitional, the longer the checklist of potential crises, and the weaker the discriminatory power of the concept (Przeworski 1999).

Third, and most importantly for crisis diagnosis, the electoral core is the dimension of democracy most directly implicated in regime survival. A democracy can function – and historically has functioned – under conditions of low turnout, weak parties, declining institutional trust, as well as imperfect deliberation. These deficiencies reduce democratic quality but do not inherently compromise democracy's capacity to survive as a regime type.

The electoral core, by contrast, is the mechanism through which democratic survival is secured. It is what allows citizens to remove governments they oppose and gives competing political forces an incentive to pursue power through competitive elections rather than through other means. When the electoral core is under direct attack, the survival of democracy as a regime is genuinely at risk; when other features are degraded, the regime may be performing poorly without being existentially threatened.

This point is acknowledged even by proponents of thicker democratic conceptions. Merkel (2018: 8), despite advocating 'embedded democracy' as an analytical framework, identifies the electoral regime as the element that "constitutes the cardinal difference from dictatorship" (see also Collier & Adcock 1999: 559; Sartori 1987: 11). Adopting an electoral definition for crisis diagnosis therefore does not reflect a normative preference for thin democracy over thick democracy; it reflects a methodological choice about which features of the political system constitute the regime type as distinct from those which measure its quality.

Accordingly, we conceptualize democratic crisis as a high-risk inflection point in which the defining institutions of the electoral core of democracy are threatened in ways that make regime breakdown a plausible outcome. This definition reserves the term for situations in which the democratic regime itself is at risk of fundamental transformation, distinguishing crisis from small-scale erosion, political dissatisfaction, and pressure on other features of the political system. To determine whether and when democratic breakdown has occurred, we rely on Przeworski et al.'s (2000) criteria stating that a regime is only democratic if political offices are filled through regular elections characterized by ex ante uncertainty about outcomes and ex post certainty about acceptance, so that competing parties have a genuine possibility of winning and losing power.

A conceptual tripartition between crisis, breakdown, and decline

Progress in conceptualizing democratic crisis requires a clear distinction between three related but analytically distinct phenomena: democratic breakdown, democratic decline, and democratic crisis. These concepts often appear in the literature as near-synonyms or as points on a single continuum but attempts to collapse them generate precisely the conceptual confusion that inflates crisis discourse and blunts its analytical edge.

Democratic breakdown refers to the collapse or terminal transformation of a democratic regime – the point at which elections cease to be competitive or consequential as mechanisms for government replacement (see above). Breakdown can occur suddenly, through a coup by the

military or a self-coup by the executive, but it can also result from the incremental erosion of electoral integrity until it crosses a point where the opposition has virtually no chance of winning.

Democratic decline (aka erosion, regression, or backsliding) refers to a deterioration in the quality of democratic institutions and practices that falls short of regime change from democracy to autocracy. In the contemporary period, democratic decline and breakdown most often takes the form of incremental undermining of democratic institutions and norms by elected incumbents rather than abrupt regime collapse (Bermeo 2016; Lührmann & Lindberg 2019; Waldner & Lust 2018). One fruitful way to identify such decline is to track changes in the level of democracy using comparative democracy measures as it is done in the annual reports by Freedom House and the V-Dem Institute. However, tracking institutional changes merely captures the outcome of pressure rather than the behavioral dynamics that produce it.

Democratic crisis, as we conceptualize it, occupies a specific analytical position between sustained decline and eventual breakdown. A crisis is a high-risk inflection point at which breakdown has become a plausible outcome – actively threatened by actors with the capacity and apparent willingness to subvert democratic institutions. This is the meaning preserved in Koselleck's (2006) classic formulation and recovered and reformulated in several democracy studies (e.g., Svensson 1986; Merkel 2018; Przeworski 2019). It implies that crisis cannot be diagnosed with structural conditions or trends in aggregate democracy levels alone; it requires the presence of behavioral transgressions that directly target the institutional foundations of electoral democracy. A democracy experiencing declining quality is not necessarily in crisis; it enters the crisis zone when the trajectory of decline is driven by actors who are actively dismantling electoral integrity, suppressing political liberties, or undermining the institutional checks that make competitive politics possible. Capoccia (2026) makes a related point from the perspective of defending democracy. What distinguishes manageable backsliding from genuine crisis is the degree to which illiberal actors have entrenched themselves institutionally, because this determines both the range of democratic countermeasures still available and the likelihood that they can succeed. The same behavioral dynamic that constitutes a hazard at an early stage may constitute a full crisis once actors have used institutional resources to make reversal difficult.

This three-way distinction maps directly onto our measurement framework: Level addresses the status question, Hazard Intensity the threat question, and Hazard Trend the drift question.

Keeping these components analytically separate allows each diagnostic issue to be addressed independently and avoids the conflations that recur across different bodies of crisis literature.

One might ask whether changes in institutional fulfilment over time in the form of trends in the Level Index should also be incorporated in the framework. We deliberately refrain from doing so because the Level Index conceptually captures the current institutional configuration of electoral democracy and thus reflects the outcome of erosion rather than the pressures that precede it. Changes in Level therefore indicate that democratic institutions have already been weakened, whereas the Hazard Intensity and Hazard Trend indices are designed to diagnose destabilizing dynamics before such institutional damage becomes consolidated. Including a measure of Level Trend would thus risk conflating symptoms of strain with realized institutional decline.

Prevalent problems in the democratic crisis literature

With this conceptual anchor established, it is possible to identify recurring flaws in the existing crisis literature that generate inflated and analytically imprecise diagnoses. These problems are not all of the same kind; they reflect three distinct relationships between the analyst's object of study and the phenomenon of regime-level democratic crisis. Identifying each type clarifies which indicators can and cannot serve as credible signs of democratic crisis and prepares the ground for the more discriminating measurement strategy.

The first type appears in applied reports and public discourse, where crisis language is attached to democratic malaise indicators without any theoretical account of why those indicators bear on regime survival. Such work was never designed as a rigorous diagnosis of regime-level crisis; the inferential slide from declining satisfaction, lower turnout, weakening civic engagement, or growing electoral volatility to 'crisis of democracy' is made casually, carried by rhetorical momentum rather than analytical argument. For instance, a Chatham House (2020) report treats declining satisfaction with democracy, changes in party systems, lower voter turnout, declining party membership, and rising electoral volatility as evidence of a crisis of liberal democracy. The Danish Democracy Commission (Demokratikommissionen 2020) similarly highlights declining party membership, low trust in politicians and journalists, limited civic engagement, professionalization of NGOs, and declining legislative quality as signs that Danish democracy is approaching a crisis. National and international audit reports by monitoring organizations are frequently characterized by this pattern.

The second type of problem is structurally different and, in some respects, more consequential precisely because it is academically more rigorous. It consists of studies that examine a single factor in depth and then make an unsupported inferential leap from declining scores in that one domain to the overall diagnosis of democratic crisis. For instance, some studies frame their entire diagnosis around voter turnout at general elections, treating a single participatory metric as a sufficient indicator of whether democracy is in crisis (e.g., CRIC 2001; Johnston & Pattie 2001). Similarly, long-term trends in institutional trust are framed as the key diagnostic lens for regime-level crisis (see Van der Meer 2017). Foa and Mounk (2016) use generational survey data on diffuse satisfaction with democracy and support for democracy as exclusive evidence of a regime-threatening trend of deconsolidation in established democracies. Other scholars identify political fragmentation as the deepest and perhaps most enduring challenge confronting contemporary Western democracies, emphasizing the declining vote share and political influence of traditional parties as the most consequential manifestation of this trend (Pildes 2021). These are mainly indicators of democratic malaise or subsystem stress, not of overall crisis.

The third type of problem appears in theoretically ambitious academic contributions that correctly target democratic crisis as their object but import indicator sets that are too broad, mixing regime-level and subsystem indicators under the same analytical heading. The broader literature already exhibits this tendency (e.g., Armingeon & Guthmann 2014; Moisés 2019), but it appears most clearly in theoretically elaborate frameworks. Merkel (2018) distinguishes between multiple domains of democracy and identifies crisis indicators within each. Alongside indicators we consider diagnostically valid – restrictions on civil liberties, weakening of executive constraints – his framework includes declining voter turnout, rising electoral volatility, declining support for catch-all parties, public distrust in political parties, and party system fragmentation. Katz (2022) and Kriesi (2020) similarly associate democratic crisis with declining turnout, weakened mainstream parties, electoral support for radical parties, electoral volatility, and citizen support and dissatisfaction.

Even Przeworski (2019), who articulates one of the most precise threshold definitions of crisis available in the literature, includes among his indicators of democratic crisis the vote shares for established parties, voter turnout, the effective number of parties, and support for far-right parties. It is worth noting that this pattern of category conflation does not require theoretical sophistication. Tormey (2014) illustrates the point: without any theoretical account of how participation indicators bear on regime survival, he interprets declines in voter turnout, party

membership, trust in politicians, and political interest as signs of democratic crisis, thereby committing the same category conflation as more theoretically elaborate frameworks.

Merkel (2018) himself draws a distinction between democracies "in crisis" and "defective democracies." This distinction matters precisely because crisis should indicate a threshold of risk that ordinary quality deterioration does not cross. In this respect, his concept of latent crisis – involving gradual erosion without breakdown – is valuable as it captures a situation of extensive stress and deterioration of democratic quality, which often proceeds the decisional threshold.

It is exactly the threshold character of the crisis concept that gives crisis its analytical purchase. We therefore consider it theoretically misleading, across all three types, to treat the performance and legitimacy of specific democratic subsystems as equivalent to the integrity of the regime as a whole. A democracy is not in crisis simply because voters are less loyal to established parties, are dissatisfied with the government, abstain from participation, or express declining trust in political institutions. Parties, parliaments, and governments can experience severe crises of confidence without the regime itself facing a risk of breakdown. What such contributions have in common is a form of category conflation, where indicators of democratic malaise or subsystem dysfunction are treated as equivalent to indicators of regime-threatening dynamics.

Attitudinal indicators deserve particular scrutiny. While studies document declining satisfaction with democratic performance (Norris 2011; Ferrín & Kriesi 2016; Foa et al. 2020), evidence for a sustained erosion of support for democracy as a regime form remains limited (van Ham et al. 2017; Welzel et al. 2022; Wüttke et al. 2022), and a long tradition of research on democratic attitudes (Almond & Verba 1963; Norris 1999; Dalton 2004) suggests these orientations are more stable than crisis discourse implies.

Expressed support for democracy frequently reflects abstract endorsement rather than a willingness to uphold democratic rules under partisan pressure (Graham & Svolik 2020; Snagovsky & Werner 2024; Jang & Svolik 2025), and survey responses do not appear correlated with democratic collapse in established democracies (Przeworski 2019: 102). Category conflation thus compounds the empirical problem that attitudinal measures both capture the wrong object and do not reliably predict the right one.

A second recurring flaw, present especially in the second and third types, is a missing behavioral threshold, meaning that structural conditions, such as economic crisis, inequality, technological and cultural change, are treated as direct indicators of democratic crisis rather

than as background factors that condition vulnerability. Structural conditions can increase the probability that a crisis will develop, but they do not constitute the crisis itself. Crisis requires powerful political actors who reject democratic rules, deny the legitimacy of opponents, tolerate or promote violence, or systematically undermine institutional constraints. This is the behavioral threshold that separates heightened vulnerability from active regime-threatening dynamics.

This distinction is recognized implicitly in much empirical work on democratic backsliding. The form of backsliding now most prevalent in established democracies – executive aggrandizement – is defined by the choices and actions of specific actors rather than by structural deterioration. Elected governments deploy legal and institutional resources deliberately to erode the functions of democratic constraints. The danger these processes represent is not structural but agentic; it is contingent on the decisions of actors who are exploiting legal cover to advance anti-democratic ends (Bermeo 2016; Lührmann & Lindberg 2019; Waldner & Lust 2018). Because decline involves changes within rather than between regime types, and because those changes unfold through formally legal and institutionally legitimate procedures, identifying the behavioral threshold at which democratic decline becomes regime-threatening is methodologically as well as conceptually demanding.

The populism debate illustrates the missing behavioral threshold particularly clearly. Populism has attracted considerable attention as a potential threat to democracy, yet it is a heterogeneous phenomenon encompassing movements across the ideological spectrum. While populist actors often portray society as divided between a virtuous people and a corrupt elite (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017), the democratic implications of their actions depend crucially on how they relate to pluralism, institutional constraints, and electoral competition. Empirically, right-wing populist parties heading governments are on average associated with declines in democratic quality (Spittler 2018; Vittori 2022). However, the mere presence or electoral success of populist parties does not constitute a credible indicator of democratic crisis. As long as they accept electoral outcomes, recognize their opponents as legitimate participants in political competition, and refrain from undermining democratic institutions, they obviously do not threaten democracy (Pappas 2016). The same logic applies to radical and extremist parties more broadly: it is anti-pluralism and rule-subverting behavior – not ideological extremism as such – that signal regime-threatening dynamics (Medzihorsky & Lindberg 2024).

Credible crisis indicators

Credible signs of democratic crisis must capture behaviors that directly undermine core institutions of electoral democracy and associated norms in ways that make regime breakdown a plausible outcome. Such indicators therefore focus on violations of democratic rules, erosion of institutional constraints, and rejection of political pluralism by actors with the capacity to destabilize the regime.

A particularly influential formulation of this logic is provided by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), who emphasize two foundational democratic norms: institutional forbearance (restraint in the use of formally legal powers) and mutual toleration (the acceptance of political opponents as legitimate rivals). Building on Linz's (1978) classic analysis of democratic breakdown, they identify four key behavioral indicators of genuine crisis risk: rejection of (or weak commitment to) the democratic rules of the game, denial of the legitimacy of political opponents, toleration or encouragement of violence, and readiness to curtail the civil liberties of opponents, including media freedom. Each of these behaviors directly targets the institutional foundations of electoral democracy.

Closely related criteria underpin the Authoritarian Warning Survey (Miller & Szakonyi 2022), which identifies six categories of authoritarian threat: treatment of the media, executive constraints, elections and treatment of the opposition, civil liberties, civil violence, and authoritarian rhetoric. These frameworks converge on the core insight that crisis signals are behavioral transgressions, not structural conditions or attitudinal trends.

Similar concerns are central to the decades old literature on democratic consolidation, which treated behavioral compliance with democratic rules as a prerequisite for regime survival (e.g., Linz & Stepan 1996; Morlino 1998). It emphasized that democracy becomes consolidated only when key actors from alle levels of society refrain from using violence, fraud, or unconstitutional methods to pursue political goals. Diamond (1999: 69), for example, highlights three interrelated behavioral dimensions of democratic compliance:[1]

- political elites respect each other's political rights, obey the constitution and the law, and avoid rhetoric that incites violence or intolerance

- politically significant organizations do not seek to overthrow democracy or employ violence, fraud, or other unconstitutional methods as deliberate tactics

[1] Diamond also lists three corresponding attitudinal dimensions but here we disregard them given our focus on behavioral indicators.

- antidemocratic movements fail to achieve a significant mass following, and ordinary citizens do not routinely resort to violence or illegal methods to express political preferences.

From these perspectives, democratic crisis arises from systematic violations of democratic rules and norms by actors with the capacity to destabilize the regime. What the accounts share is an implicit common root in liberal political theory, whose two foundational concerns are the unchecked and arbitrary exercise of power, and the suppression of political pluralism through intolerance of rival perspectives and ways of life (Holmes 1995).

The first concern has a long pedigree running from Montesquieu's separation of powers through Madison's institutional architecture of checks and balances to contemporary theories of horizontal accountability. The second concern runs from Locke's toleration of competing religious and civil commitments through Stuart Mill's insistence on the legitimacy of diverse ways of life and more recent emphasis on mutual recognition.

The convergence of the accounts on these same two mechanisms is theoretically significant as it reflects the shared diagnosis that crises are generated by identifiable patterns of actor behavior that can be detected before they produce irreversible institutional damage. This convergence provides the theoretical warrant for organizing the Hazard Intensity component around institutional restraint and mutual toleration as its two core subdimensions.

A three-component framework

Informed by these convergent frameworks and by the conceptual distinctions developed above, we organize crisis indicators into three analytically distinct components. The three-component design connects with the democratic resilience literature. Boese et al. (2021) distinguish between onset resilience – the capacity to prevent autocratization – and breakdown resilience – the capacity to avert collapse once it is underway, with the first stage dependent on institutional strength and the second on the intensity of pressures. Croissant and Lott (2025) similarly distinguish resilience capacity from resilience performance. Our framework maps onto this structure: Level captures institutional capacity, while Hazard Intensity and Hazard Trend capture current exposure and its dynamics.

The first component, Level, signifies the extent to which core democratic institutions are currently fulfilled and reflects the structural strength, or immune capacity, of a political regime. Consistently with our conceptualization of democratic crisis as a situation in which core

democratic institutions are placed at genuine risk, we focus exclusively on components constitutive of electoral democracy: elected officials, clean elections, inclusive suffrage, free political parties, and the protection of political liberties. Their status provides direct information about a democracy's basic institutional health and its immunity with respect to imminent breakdown. Treating this dimension separately from Hazard Intensity allows us to distinguish between democracies that are weak because their core institutions are underdeveloped and democracies that are strong but currently exposed to acute stress.

The second component, Hazard Intensity, captures the intensity of contemporary behavioral pressures that strain democratic institutions, focusing on actor-specific violations of institutional restraint and rejections of political pluralism. It reflects the degree to which actors within or outside government create conditions that strain democratic institutions, thereby increasing the likelihood of institutional damage or breakdown. It has been used to draw a distinction between authoritarian actors – those openly in opposition to the democratic regime who seek to transform it into autocracy – and illiberal or semi-loyal actors who are not fully committed to democratic norms and may undermine the liberal dimensions of the regime without directly targeting elections (Merkel & Lührmann 2021; see also Linz 1978). Our perspective spans both categories, capturing attempts to concentrate executive power and suppress opponents as well as normative delegitimation of opponents and anti-pluralist mobilization.

The third component, Hazard Trend, captures the recent trajectory of hazard pressures, indicating whether democratic strain is intensifying or receding. It directly addresses the flow question that is frequently neglected in static cross-sectional analyses of democratic health. It is obviously important not just to capture where a country stands on hazard intensity at a given point, but also whether that intensity is increasing. A country with moderate but rapidly rising hazard may represent a more acute crisis risk than one with high but stable hazard, because in the former the window for effective intervention is narrowing. Capoccia (2026) formalizes this insight from the perspective of democratic defense by emphasizing a temporal paradox: the countermeasures available to democratic actors narrow precisely as the urgency of the threat increases.

The relationship between the three components generates a typology of democratic configurations that clarifies when the crisis threshold is reached (see Table 1). The primary diagnostic axis is Level crossed with Hazard Intensity.

Table 1. Configurations of democratic crisis conditions

	Low Hazard	**High Hazard**
High Level	*Consolidated, high-quality democracy*: strong institutions and no active behavioral challenge; crisis not imminent	*Democracy under* stress: strong institutions absorb significant pressure; latent crisis if Trend is rising
Low Level	*Fragile, low-quality* democracy: weak institutions but no active behavioral challenge; crisis not imminent	*Democratic* crisis: weak institutions face active behavioral challenge; acute crisis if Trend is rising

A regime with high Level and low Hazard Intensity represents consolidated democracy, where strong institutions face no organized behavioral challenge, and crisis is not on the horizon. A regime with low Level and low Hazard Intensity is fragile rather than imperiled; its institutional foundations are underdeveloped, but without organized behavioral pressure, breakdown is not imminent. A regime with high Level and high Hazard Intensity is under stress as strong institutions are absorbing significant pressure, but their capacity to resist remains intact, and whether the situation constitutes a crisis depends critically on trajectory. It is the combination of low Level and high Hazard Intensity that most directly satisfies the crisis threshold. Weak institutions face active behavioral challenges, and the gap between current conditions and breakdown is narrow.

Hazard Trend operates as a modifier that can shift regimes across these configurations over time. A rising Hazard Trend signal elevates any high-Hazard case toward or further into crisis territory – including high-Level cases where institutional strength would otherwise buffer against acute risk – because it indicates that hazard intensity is escalating and the window for effective intervention is narrowing. A Hazard falling Trend moderates the diagnosis even in low-Level, high-Hazard Intensity configurations, signaling that destabilizing dynamics are receding rather than compounding.

Together, these three components allow for a more fine-grained identification of democratic vulnerability than approaches that treat crisis as a single latent condition. The framework is diagnostic rather than predictive; it is designed to identify institutional weaknesses, exposure to destabilizing forces, and their recent dynamics, not to provide a concise forecast of the timing or likelihood of democratic breakdown.

A key implication is that democracies with similar institutional baselines may face very different risks depending on their exposure to hazard and the direction of recent change. For this reason, we deliberately refrain from collapsing Level, Hazard Intensity, and Hazard Trend into a single composite crisis index. The components capture distinct analytical questions whose answers can pull in opposite directions; aggregating across them would suppress precisely the variation the framework is designed to expose and require hard-to-justify assumptions about weighting and functional form.

Selection on empirical indicators

Selecting indicators for the Level and Hazard components requires navigating well-known methodological trade-offs. One concerns the choice between judgmental and directly observable indicators. Judgmental indicators rely on human coders, including experts, to evaluate latent properties. They are vulnerable to personal biases, while directly observable indicators can in principle be verified without interpretation (Little & Meng 2023), but they often fail to capture the normative dimensions of political behavior that are central to capturing democratic backsliding and crisis (Knutsen et al. 2024). Another issue concerns the choice between single-indicator and composite approaches, where the use of multiple indicators is generally preferable as long as aggregation assumptions can be theoretically justified (Munck 2009).

Based on the conceptual distinctions introduced earlier, we organize crisis indicators into two analytically distinct clusters. The first cluster concerns the fulfilment of defining attributes of democracy. The extent to which constitutive institutions – competitive elections and basic political liberties – are in place reflects the baseline health, or institutional immunity, of a democratic regime. The second cluster captures the hazard environment and its recent trajectory, focusing on behavioral symptoms of democratic strain such as violations of institutional restraint and rejection of pluralism. Together, these clusters allow for a more precise diagnosis of democratic crisis, identifying not only how robust a democracy currently is, but also how severely it is being challenged, and if the intensity of challenges is increasing or decreasing.

To translate these conceptual insights into an empirically tractable framework, we organize credible indicators of democratic crisis into a structured set of clusters, dimensions, and subdimensions, summarized in Table 2. The table distinguishes between two analytically

distinct clusters. The first captures the fulfilment of constitutive democratic attributes and reflects the baseline institutional strength, or immunity, of a democratic regime. These indicators directly measure whether the defining institutions of electoral democracy – free and fair elections and the protection of political liberties – are in place and functioning.

The second cluster captures hazard signals, understood as behavioral pressures that strain these institutions and increase the risk of democratic breakdown. This cluster is subdivided into two dimensions: institutional restraint and mutual toleration. Indicators linked to institutional restraint capture violations of horizontal accountability and state coercion, including curtailment of judicial and parliamentary constraints and the use of repression. Indicators linked to mutual toleration capture behaviors that undermine pluralistic competition, such as support for anti-pluralist organizations, elite disrespect for political opponents, anti-democratic mobilization, and political violence.

Table 2: Clusters, components, and subcomponents reflecting democratic crisis

Cluster	**Dimension**	**Subdimensions**	**Indicators**
Core democratic attributes (immunity)	Electoral integrity	Unclean elections, limited suffrage, electorally non-accountable executive and legislature, suppression of political parties' ability to freely organize and stand for elections	Credible elections (GSoD) Inclusive suffrage (GSoD) Free political parties (GSoD) Elected government (GSoD)
	Political liberties	Suppression of freedom of expression, freedom of association, and freedom of peaceful assembly	Freedom of association and assembly (GSoD) Freedom of expression (GSoD Freedom of the press (GSoD)
Hazard signals (decease and inflammation)	Institutional restraint	Curtailment of judicial constraints	Judicial independence (GSoD) Executive respects constitution (V-Dem)
		Curtailment of constraints by parliament and integrity oversight institutions	Effective parliament (GSoD)
		Violent state repression	Personal integrity and security (GSoD)

	Mutual toleration	Active support for anti-pluralist organizations	Vote share for anti-pluralist parties (V-Party)
		Disrespect for political opponents and particular social groups	Political polarization (V-Dem) Political parties hate speech (V-Dem) Respect counterarguments (V-Dem)
		Anti-democratic mobilization and political violence	Mobilization for autocracy (V-Dem) Political violence (V-Dem) Violent political demonstrations (ACLED, IEP)

Each subdimension is tentatively and for illustrative purposes linked to a specific set of observable indicators drawn from established cross-national data sources. These indicators are discussed and operationalized below. The clustering logic ensures that each indicator included in the empirical analysis can be directly traced back to a theoretically grounded mechanism through which democracy may become vulnerable to crisis, while avoiding the inclusion of broader phenomena that signal democratic malaise without directly threatening regime survival.

It bears mentioning that the framework is deliberately best suited to diagnosing incumbent-driven erosion of democratic institutions. However, the conditions it captures may also signal vulnerability to other breakdown pathways as weak institutional fulfilment and sustained executive aggrandizement can lower the political and organizational costs of military intervention or facilitate elite acquiescence to abrupt regime interruption. The framework thus identifies contexts of heightened vulnerability, even if it does not model alternative breakdown mechanisms directly.

Measuring fulfilment of democratic attributes

As mentioned above, the simplest and most direct expression of the strength of democracy is the level of democracy. To assess the underlying "immune strength" of democratic regimes, we therefore construct a Level Index (L) that captures the degree to which the *defining institutional attributes* of electoral democracy are fulfilled. Consistent with our conceptualization of democratic crisis as a situation in which *core* democratic institutions are placed at genuine risk, we focus exclusively on components that are constitutive of procedural, electoral democracy: elected officials, clean elections, inclusive suffrage, free

political parties, and the protection of political liberties, that is, freedom of expression, the press, association, and peaceful assembly. These components correspond closely to our definition and represent relatively uncontested features of democracy as a regime type. Their status provides direct information about a democracy's basic health condition and thus its immunity with respect to imminent breakdown.

Importantly, the Level Index is not intended to capture pressures on democracy, but the degree to which its constitutive institutions are currently in place. While hazard indicators capture destabilizing behavior and strain, the level of democracy reflects the baseline institutional configuration upon which such pressures operate. Conceptually, this distinction mirrors the difference between the immune capacity of democratic institutions and the intensity of the challenges they face. Treating these dimensions separately allows us to distinguish between democracies that are weak because their core institutions are underdeveloped and democracies that are strong but currently exposed to acute stress.

To measure Level, we rely on the Global State of Democracy (GSoD) indices produced by International IDEA (2025), which offer globally comparable, annually updated measures of democratic institutions and rights (see Tables A1-A7 in the Appendix). Because the selected indicators are constitutive (aka formative), they jointly define what electoral democracy *is* rather than reflecting an underlying latent trait. As a result, deficiencies in one dimension cannot be meaningfully compensated for by strength in others: Severe violations in one domain undermine the overall functioning of democratic contestation even if other areas remain strong. This logic is central to classical democratic theory. To align our measurement with this non-compensatory structure, we combine the seven standardized GSoD subindices by calculating their geometric mean.

This approach is based on a weakest-link approach (Goertz 2006; Munck 2009) as the geometric mean penalizes low values more strongly than an arithmetic mean, ensuring that serious deficiencies in any core dimension meaningfully reduce the overall democracy level. Meanwhile, this procedure facilitates continuity and comparability because, unlike a strict minimum operator (simply taking the lowest score across all subindices), the geometric mean preserves gradation and comparability across countries and years, avoiding extreme discontinuities.

Conceptually, the resulting Level Index, ranging from 0 to 1, captures the immune strength of the democratic regime. A high score indicates that the core institutions enabling electoral

contestation are robustly fulfilled, meaning the system is well-equipped to withstand stress. A low score indicates vulnerability: even moderate hazards may push such a system toward breakdown.

The distribution of the resulting Level Index scores for 2024 shows that most OECD democracies continue to fulfil the core institutional attributes of electoral democracy at a quite high level (see Figure A1 in the Appendix). At the lower end of the distribution, however, a clear pattern of democratic underperformance emerges. Colombia, Mexico, Hungary, and particularly Türkiye exhibit substantially lower scores, reflecting deficits in one or more constitutive dimensions.

While our analysis treats the Level Index as a continuous measure of institutional fulfilment, it is also useful to consider whether there exists a lower bound below which a regime can no longer plausibly be described as an electoral democracy. In line with the criteria described in connection with our conceptualization of democracy – emphasizing a real possibility of government alternation via elections – we treat values below 0.5 on the Level Index as indicative of regimes in which these conditions are no longer jointly satisfied. Substantively, such scores reflect systematic deficiencies across several constitutive dimensions, implying that elections no longer provide a credible mechanism for government replacement.

On this basis, Türkiye falls below the threshold typically associated with electoral democracy, while Hungary and Mexico appear as cases close to the borderline. We emphasize, however, that this threshold is heuristic rather than mechanical. Importantly, the analytical focus of the paper remains on democratic crisis among regimes that plausibly qualify as democracies; the threshold is introduced to clarify the constitutive boundary of the regime type, not to substitute for assessments of hazard intensity or trend.

The broad takeaway is that while core democratic institutions remain comparatively strong in much of the OECD, a significant minority of member states demonstrate weaker democratic fulfilment, highlighting areas where democratic immune strength is comparatively fragile.

Measuring hazard intensity and trend

High institutional fulfilment does not preclude exposure to substantial and rising democratic hazards, underscoring the need for separate estimates of hazard intensity and trend. To capture the degree to which democracies are currently exposed to forces that undermine their integrity, we construct a Hazard Intensity Index (H) based on indicators (see Tables A8-A13

in the Appendix) that reflect pressures on institutional restraints (curtailment of judicial constraints, curtailment of constraints by parliament and integrity oversight institutions, violent state repression) and mutual toleration (active support for anti-pluralist organizations, disrespect for political opponents and particular social groups, anti-democratic mobilization and political violence). Conceptually, hazard represents the extent to which actors within or outside the government create conditions that strain democratic institutions, thereby increasing the likelihood of institutional damage or breakdown.

Each hazard dimension can be directly linked to one or more constitutive attributes of electoral democracy: weakening judicial and parliamentary constraints undermines electoral accountability; repression and political violence restrict participation and contestation; and anti-pluralism, polarization, and hate speech erode the mutual toleration required for competitive elections to function.

Beyond this direct institutional linkage, the selected hazard indicators capture three analytically important aspects of democratic vulnerability. First, they signal the extent to which incumbents and other powerful actors display authoritarian ambitions or a willingness to employ illegitimate means in pursuit of political advantage. Second, they reflect the degree to which such attempts encounter effective resistance from opposition actors, oversight institutions, and civil society, thereby indicating how constrained or unconstrained power holders are in practice. Third, by spanning elite behavior, organizational strategies, and mass mobilization, the indicators capture compliance with democratic norms across different layers of society.

Because the pressures operate across multiple domains, our indicator set integrates measures from various sources, which collectively provide broad coverage, conceptual precision, and diverse measurement strategies. The selected indicators cover five analytically distinct but mutually reinforcing forms of democratic hazard.

Hazard Intensity reflects current exposure rather than long-term institutional development; we therefore restrict measurement to the most recent five-year period (2020–2024). This window is long enough to detect sustained deterioration and structural shifts – since democratic hazards rarely manifest as abrupt one-year shocks but accumulate gradually – while remaining focused on contemporary threats and avoiding excessive sensitivity to short-term fluctuations. To weight recent developments most heavily, we introduce an exponential smoothing procedure (see below).

To construct a summary Hazard Intensity Index, we apply principal component analysis (PCA) to the six subdimension indices. This approach treats the underlying components as reflective indicators of a latent hazard dimension. This means that we consider the indicators as correlated manifestations of the broader phenomenon of democratic strain.

The PCA corroborates that the included measures reflect a single underlying dimension of democratic hazard. The first principal component has an eigenvalue of 4.28 and accounts for a staggering 71 percent of the total variance—far above conventional thresholds and substantially larger than the second component (eigenvalue 0.56). The remaining components all have eigenvalues below one and explain only marginal additional variance, indicating that the common variation across indicators is overwhelmingly dominated by a single factor. All indicators load positively and strongly on the first component, with loadings ranging from 0.38 to 0.44 – broad and consistent contribution to a shared hazard dimension. This pattern is precisely what we would expect if the indicators tapped into a coherent underlying syndrome of democratic strain. We therefore use the first principal component as our baseline hazard score before applying temporal smoothing.

However, a static hazard measure does not sufficiently capture the dynamics of threat, especially when recent deterioration indicates ongoing processes of destabilization. To incorporate temporal proximity and signal acceleration or deceleration in hazard conditions, we apply an exponential smoothing procedure to the PCA scores, H. Specifically, we compute:

$$Hazard\ Intensity\ Index\ = \frac{H \cdot e^{0} + L1.H \cdot e^{-1} + L2.H \cdot e^{-2} + L3.H \cdot e^{-3} + L4.H \cdot e^{-4}}{e^{0} + e^{-1} + e^{-2} + e^{-3} + e^{-4}},$$

where H is the PCA-based hazard estimate in year *t*, and Lk.H is H lagged k years. This specification gives exponentially greater weight to recent hazard levels. The use of exponential weights allows for a smooth decay in influence across the five-year window and avoids arbitrary cutoff points, while ensuring that recent developments matter most for present-day collapse risk.

The resulting scores are standardized and interpreted as relative measures of democratic strain rather than absolute probabilities of breakdown. A score of zero indicates the OECD average; positive values signal above-average exposure to institutional pressure, negative values comparatively low exposure. Higher values correspond to situations in which multiple hazard

domains are simultaneously elevated; strongly negative scores characterize democracies with stable institutional environments.

The distribution of hazard scores reveals substantial variation across OECD countries (see Figure A2 in the Appendix). Türkiye, Mexico, Colombia, Hungary, Poland, USA, Slovakia, South Korea, and Greece display markedly elevated levels, far above the rest of the sample, indicating a pronounced divergence between democracies facing acute multi-domain hazards and a broader group with stable, low-exposure environments.

To capture whether hazard conditions have been improving or worsening in the recent past, we construct a Hazard Trend Index based on the trajectory of the PCA derived hazard intensity scores over the period 2020-2024. Whereas the hazard index captures the level of contemporary strain, the trend index reflects the direction and magnitude of recent change. This distinction follows from the logic that a country experiencing accelerating deterioration is generally at greater risk than one where hazard has stabilized or begun to reverse, even at comparable absolute levels.

Operationally, we estimate the trend by running a simple linear regression of the form

$$Hazard\ Trend\ Index \quad = \alpha_c + \beta_c \cdot t + \varepsilon_{ct},$$

where the trend is represented by the hazard score for country c in year t, and $\beta_c$is the estimated slope of hazard over time. We adopt the same five-year window for estimating the trend as the intensity because democratic hazard rarely shifts in a single year but typically evolves through cumulative changes in political behavior, institutional constraints, or mobilization dynamics. The slope coefficient $\beta_c$is extracted only for the most recent year (2024) and used as that country's trend score. This procedure yields a continuous trend measure.

The hazard Trend Index should be interpreted as a relative measure of recent change rather than as a direct indicator of democratic risk. Positive values indicate that democratic hazard has been increasing over the observation window, while negative values indicate that hazard has been declining. Values close to zero suggest relative stability. The magnitude of the trend reflects the pace of change rather than the absolute level of hazard. A country may exhibit a negative trend while still facing substantial democratic strain, just as a country with low current hazard may show a positive trend. For this reason, the trend index is interpreted jointly with the hazard intensity and the level of democratic fulfilment, rather than as a standalone measure.

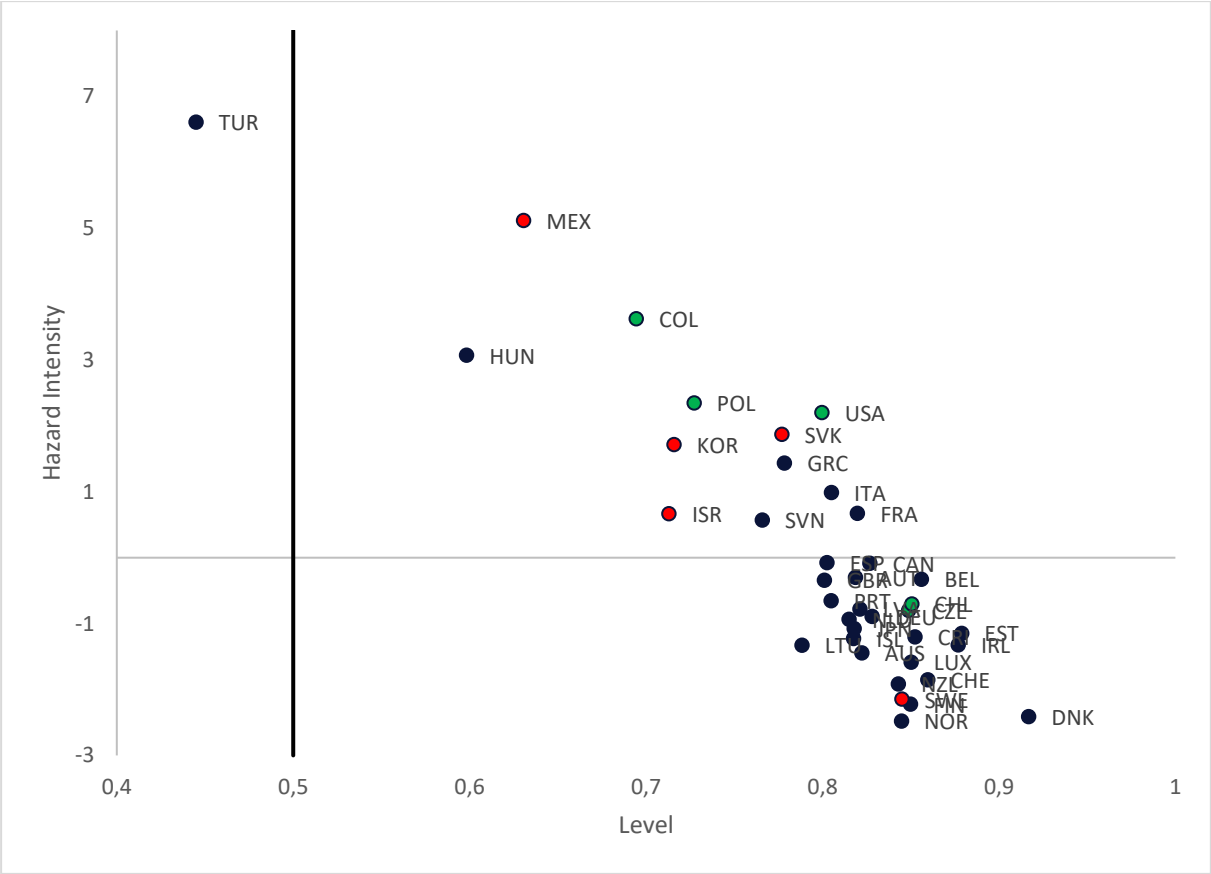
The estimated trend coefficients show substantial heterogeneity across OECD countries during 2020–2024 (see Figure A3 in the Appendix). Slovakia, South Korea, and Mexico exhibit sharply positive trends, while Israel and Sweden show more moderate increases.

Chile, Colombia, Poland, the United States, and Czechia display negative slopes, reflecting partial recovery from earlier peaks. Countries with consistently low hazard levels – Denmark, Finland, Switzerland – show essentially flat trajectories.

Thresholds used to identify instances of democratic crisis are inherently somewhat arbitrary. However, we suggest that a Level score below 0.70 indicates that institutional capacity has eroded to the point where sustained behavioral pressure poses a genuine threat to the core electoral criteria of democratic rule. In addition, we suggest that a Hazard score above 2.0 indicates that the combination of behavioral challenges exceeds what normal democratic contestation involves and represents a configuration that could overwhelm institutionally weakened democracies. The Trend component serves as the critical modifier within each configuration, where a positive Trend signals active deterioration and acute breakdown risk, distinguishing countries in ongoing crisis (e.g., Mexico, Hungary) from those where pressure remains serious but is receding (e.g., Colombia, Poland).

Figure 1 plots democratic institutional fulfilment (immunity strength) against contemporaneous hazard intensity, while cases with substantively increasing hazard trend are marked red, and substantively decreasing cases are marked green. Overall, the figure reveals a strong negative association ($r = -.89$). Countries with weak democratic institutions tend to face more intense behavioral pressures, and vice versa. It also reflects the fact that most countries currently exposed to elevated hazard have already experienced decline in their Level scores, suggesting that sustained behavioral pressure does eventually translate into institutional damage.

Figure 1: Scatterplot of democratic level and hazard intensity



Note: Level indicates the degree of fulfilment of constitutive democratic institutions based on the Level Index, while hazard intensity indicates the pressure facing democratic institutions based on the Hazard Intensity Index. Color coding reflects the Hazard Trend Index: countries marked in red exhibit a substantively positive trend (greater than 0.1), countries marked in green exhibit a substantively negative trend (below -0.1), and countries marked in blue show relatively stable hazard levels within this interval. The vertical line at L = 0.5 separates regimes that fall below the threshold of electoral democracy from those that meet minimal democratic criteria. The horizontal line indicates the OECD average level of hazard intensity during the observation period.

However, the correlation is far from perfect, and it is precisely the deviations that the framework is designed to identify. Some democracies with relatively strong institutional foundations are exposed to elevated hazards, signaling that robust institutions do not preclude acute stress; others show weak institutions but comparatively low behavioral pressure, suggesting fragility without immediate crisis. Treating Level and Hazard Intensity and Hazard Trend as separate components rather than collapsing them into a single index preserves this diagnostic variation, which a composite score would obscure.

Comparison of hazard intensity and alternative signals of crisis

To illustrate how different conceptualizations of democratic crisis translate into substantively different empirical diagnoses, Table 3 compares country rankings produced by the Hazard Intensity Index with rankings based on several indicators (see Table A14 in the Appendix) that are frequently interpreted as signals of democratic crisis in the existing literature and public debate: voter turnout, citizen confidence in parliament and political parties, satisfaction with the political system, support for democracy, and support for a strong and unconstrained leadership.

Table 3: Comparative ranking of Hazard Intensity and alternative crisis indicators

Country	Hazard	Turnout	Vote share populist parties	Importance of democracy	Strong leader	Confidence in parliament	Satisfaction with political system
Norway	-2.48 (38)	77.17 (28)	25.50 (23)	92.60 (31)	14.60 (29)	69.60 (33)	41.40 (31)
Denmark	-2.41 (37)	84.16 (32)	43.20 (8)	92.60 (31)	20.60 (24)	46.30 (29)	51.20 (33)
Finland	-2.22 (36)	71.55 (24)	20.10 (28)	87.00 (25)	14.60 (29)	44.70 (28)	28.60 (25)
Sweden	-2.15 (35)	84.21 (33)	20.50 (27)	90.20 (27)	18.90 (25)	63.30 (32)	31.50 (27)
N. Zealand	-1.92 (34)	78.20 (30)	2.60 (33)	84.90 (22)	15.20 (28)	38.90 (22)	18.90 (20)
Switzerland	-1.85 (33)	46.64 (1)	29.00 (17)	87.90 (26)	20.90 (23)	56.40 (30)	47.60 (32)
Luxembourg	-1.59 (32)	87.18 (36)	9.54 (32)				
Australia	-1.44 (31)	89.74 (38)	34.56 (14)	79.10 (18)	30.90 (12)	27.60 (13)	24.70 (24)
Lithuania	-1.33 (30)	59.95 (8)	55.30 (4)	71.80 (10)	50.50 (4)	22.40 (10)	10.10 (4)
Ireland	-1.32 (29)	59.70 (5)	28.60 (19)				
Iceland	-1.22 (28)	80.78 (31)	0.00 (36)	92.60 (31)	11.40 (32)	36.20 (21)	10.90 (5)
Costa Rica	-1.20 (27)	59.96 (9)	2.10 (34)				
Estonia	-1.15 (26)	63.53 (14)	24.30 (25)	75.10 (14)	16.80 (26)	31.20 (15)	14.80 (13)
Japan	-1.08 (25)	53.80 (2)	73.00 (2)	73.50 (12)	27.20 (15)	31.10 (14)	18.10 (18)
Netherlands	-0.94 (24)	77.74 (29)	27.20 (21)	77.40 (15)	32.00 (10)	41.90 (24)	22.70 (22)
Germany	-0.89 (23)	76.57 (27)	15.30 (29)	91.40 (28)	24.30 (18)	42.30 (25)	34.50 (28)
Czechia	-0.80 (22)	70.25 (20)	40.30 (12)	67.60 (6)	24.70 (17)	13.30 (2)	14.70 (12)
Latvia	-0.78 (21)	59.43 (4)	40.60 (10)	69.30 (7)	48.00 (6)	26.70 (11)	8.60 (3)
Chile	-0.70 (20)	84.87 (34)	0.00 (36)	54.90 (1)	39.10 (8)	21.50 (9)	14.40 (11)
Portugal	-0.66 (19)	59.90 (7)	0.10 (35)	72.40 (11)	43.70 (7)	33.00 (18)	20.90 (21)
UK	-0.34 (18)	59.76 (6)	14.30 (30)	79.90 (19)	27.60 (14)	32.40 (17)	16.60 (14)
Belgium	-0.33 (17)	87.42 (37)	40.40 (11)				
Austria	-0.30 (16)	76.25 (26)	53.70 (5)	86.40 (23)	14.30 (31)	43.60 (26)	35.00 (29)
Canada	-0.08 (15)	62.25 (13)	24.11 (26)	78.20 (16)	24.20 (19)	44.30 (27)	35.80 (30)
Spain	-0.08 (14)	66.59 (16)	26.60 (22)	84.30 (20)	22.90 (20)	31.70 (16)	17.60 (16)
Slovenia	0.57 (13)	70.97 (23)	25.00 (24)	66.40 (5)	28.10 (13)	15.00 (6)	5.50 (1)
Israel	0.67 (12)	70.63 (21)	72.20 (3)				
France	0.67 (11)	66.71 (17)	29.30 (16)	78.50 (17)	22.90 (20)	33.10 (9)	13.20 (9)
Italy	0.99 (10)	63.79 (15)	32.30 (15)	86.40 (23)	31.30 (11)	27.50 (12)	12.20 (6)
Greece	1.43 (9)	61.10 (11)	28.70 (18)	92.30 (30)	9.00 (33)	14.20 (3)	8.40 (2)
South Korea	1.71 (8)	66.97 (18)	0.00 (36)	65.30 (4)	66.80 (2)	20.70 (8)	24.30 (23)
Slovakia	1.87 (7)	61.12 (12)	28.50 (20)	64.20 (3)	26.20 (16)	39.00 (23)	12.60 (8)
USA	2.20 (6)	70.75 (22)	50.00 (6)	69.80 (8)	37.10 (9)	14.80 (5)	12.20 (6)
Poland	2.34 (5)	74.38 (25)	35.40 (13)	84.80 (21)	16.00 (27)	19.30 (7)	17.70 (17)
Hungary	3.07 (4)	69.59 (19)	88.60 (1)	91.50 (29)	21.10 (22)	34.80 (20)	18.60 (19)
Colombia	3.62 (3)	58.10 (3)	9.90 (31)	74.00 (13)	59.30 (3)	5.40 (1)	14.00 (10)
Mexico	5.11 (2)	60.54 (10)	42.40 (9)	71.60 (9)	69.60 (1)	14.40 (4)	16.60 (14)
Türkiye	6.61 (1)	87.04 (35)	45.70 (7)	59.80 (2)	49.40 (5)	59.20 (31)	28.60 (25)

Note: Rankings reflect risk level reflected by the indicator scores, so that high ranking means higher risk level.

The sources for alternative indicators are listed in the Appendix.

The comparison reveals substantial divergence across indicators. Countries that rank high on Hazard Intensity often do not appear particularly fragile when assessed using attitudinal or participatory measures. Conversely, several democracies that rank poorly on trust, satisfaction, or turnout exhibit comparatively low levels of behavioral hazard. Depending on the indicator used, the same country can be classified as stable, vulnerable, or crisis-prone.

Table 4 reports Pearson correlations of scores (above the diagonal) and Spearman rank correlations (below the diagonal) between the Hazard Intensity Index and the alternative indicators in Table 3. All score correlations show the expected sign, but they vary considerably in magnitude. The correlations with voter turnout and populist party vote shares are very low – and the rank order correlation with the latter is even slightly negative, suggesting that these signals do not track the behavioral posture of key political actors. The attitudinal indicators show somewhat higher correlations, yet even the strongest, that is, confidence in parliament (r = -.55), accounts for less than a third of the variation in Hazard Intensity scores, indicating that our index captures institutional and behavioral dynamics that public opinion data reflects only partially. This indicates that widely used indicators of democratic malaise do not consistently track the kinds of pressures that directly threaten the functioning of electoral democracy.

Table 4: Correlation between scores and rank order of Hazard and alternative crisis indicators

	Hazard	Turnout	Vote share populist parties	Importance of democracy	Strong leader	Confidence in parliament	Satisfaction with democracy
Hazard		-.21	.06	-.48	.34	-.55	-.44
Turnout	.36		-.20	.22	-.29	.13	.13
Vote share populist parties	-.07	.29		-.07	.15	-.12	.10
Importance of democracy	.51	.34	.17		-.71	.75	.62
Strong leader	.38	.29	.18	.75		-.54	-.45

Confidence in parliament	.44	.16	.14	.82	.63		.77
Satisfaction with democracy	.32	.17	-.10	.65	.43	.85	

Note: Pearson's r correlations of scores above the diagonal, Spearman's rho correlations of rank order below the diagonal.

These discrepancies are not merely a matter of measurement noise or scaling but tend to reflect deeper conceptual differences. Attitudinal and participation-based indicators primarily capture citizens' evaluations of political performance, representation, or responsiveness, which may fluctuate for many reasons without placing the democratic regime itself in jeopardy. The disagreement in rankings reinforces that assessments of democratic crisis are highly sensitive to the choice of conceptualization and measurement, and commonly used indicators are likely to conflate dissatisfaction or democratic stress with genuine regime-threatening dynamics.

Caveats and limitations

As discussed in the framework section, we deliberately refrain from incorporating a Level Trend measure, as the Level Index captures the outcome of erosion rather than the pressures that precede it, and adding such a measure would risk conflating symptoms of strain with realized institutional decline.

Moreover, we refrain from combining the three components into a single composite score on both methodological and conceptual grounds. Each captures a distinct and analytically separable dimension of democratic vulnerability; collapsing them would require specifying aggregation rules, weighting, and functional relationships that are not currently established by theory or evidence, and even small differences in such specifications could substantially alter country rankings. We therefore present the three components separately, preserving conceptual clarity and allowing transparent interpretation of democratic vulnerability.

A related limitation is that the framework is not designed to produce probabilistic forecasts of democratic breakdown. While the indicators identify conditions associated with democratic erosion and collapse, they do not yield concrete estimates of when, or whether, breakdown will occur. The framework is best understood as a structured diagnostic tool for identifying elevated fragility and destabilizing dynamics, not as a prediction model.

A further limitation concerns the scope of breakdown pathways that the framework is designed to capture directly. The diagnostic logic is primarily tailored to incumbent-driven erosion of democratic institutions and norms, where crisis unfolds through gradual weakening of constraints, mutual toleration, and electoral competition. Abrupt regime interruptions such as military coups and foreign occupation follow different dynamics and are therefore not directly modeled. At the same time, the conditions identified by the framework, including weak institutional fulfilment and sustained executive aggrandizement, may increase the permissiveness of the political environment for such outcomes by lowering the political and organizational costs of military intervention or facilitating elite acquiescence. In this sense, it identifies contexts of heightened vulnerability, even where the immediate breakdown mechanism lies outside its primary analytic focus.

A final central limitation of the empirical implementation of this framework is the inherent delay in the production and release of cross-national data on democratic attributes and hazard signals. Most of the indicators we rely on are updated annually rather than continuously. As a consequence, the indices reflect conditions up to the most recent completed data year, but not the political developments that have occurred since then. This lag is especially consequential in periods of rapid institutional or behavioral change. For example, the current developments in the United States under Donald Trump's second term (including intensified norm violations, direct challenges to judicial constraints, and increasingly aggressive actions against political opponents) are the kinds of symptoms that would clearly signal rising hazard or even movement toward crisis. Yet these events cannot be incorporated into our empirical measures until the underlying datasets release their next update. Instead, we have found declining hazard rates in the US, reflecting developments in the years prior to Trump 2.0.

However, this temporal limitation does not undermine the value of the conceptual distinctions that motivate the framework, nor does it diminish the theoretical relevance of the dimensions we identify. Rather, it highlights the constraints inherent in any cross-national, data-driven assessment of democratic risk. Annual data enable systematic measurement, comparability across countries, and historical coverage, but they inevitably lag behind real-time political dynamics. The inclusion of a trend component partially mitigates this limitation by emphasizing recent trajectories rather than single-year snapshots.

The empirical scores should accordingly be interpreted as structured assessments of medium-term developments rather than up-to-the-minute diagnostics. Where recent events carry

exceptional importance, the framework should be complemented with qualitative analysis and near-real-time observation.

Conclusions

Claims that democracy is in crisis have again become widespread, yet the concept of democratic crisis is often invoked in vague, overly expansive, and analytically undisciplined ways. We have argued that progress in this debate requires a more restrictive and institutionally grounded understanding of as a crisis as a high-risk inflection point at which the electoral core itself is threatened.

From this vantage point, many commonly used crisis indicators prove poorly suited as they do not identify regime-threatening situations. Indicators capturing dissatisfaction, participation, party system change, or public opinion may signal democratic malaise or long-term challenges. But they do not, in themselves, indicate that democracy as a regime form is at risk. We therefore advance a framework that distinguishes clearly between three analytically independent diagnostic dimensions: the fulfilment of constitutive democratic institutions (Level), contemporary behavioral pressures that strain these institutions (Hazard Intensity), and the recent trajectory of such pressures (Hazard Trend).

Applied to contemporary OECD countries, this framework yields a differentiated empirical picture. Most democracies in this group continue to exhibit high levels of institutional fulfilment and low exposure to regime-threatening pressures. At the same time, a non-trivial subset of cases displays elevated hazard levels, rising hazard trends, or both – sometimes in combination with weakened institutional baselines. In a few instances, democracy has already broken down or is close to doing so, even within a group of countries commonly assumed to be highly resilient democracies.

The central take-away of our preliminary analysis is that democratic crisis is neither ubiquitous nor illusory. It is a conditional and uneven phenomenon that becomes visible only when conceptual precision is matched with selective and behaviorally grounded measurement. By disentangling institutional immunity, hazard intensity, and hazard trend, the framework avoids both alarmism and complacency: rather than asking whether democracy is in crisis in general, it provides tools for identifying when and where democratic regimes face elevated and potentially escalating pressures, and for distinguishing genuine crisis from broader democratic stress. While we illustrate the framework using a particular set of

indicators and data sources, the measurement choices are intentionally non-exclusive, and the conceptual tripartition is portable to alternative operationalizations and empirical settings.

Bibliography

Almond, Gabriel A. & Sidney Verba (1963). *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Armingeon, Klaus & Kai Guthmann (2014). "Democracy in Crisis? The Declining Support for National Democracy in European Countries, 2007–2011." *European Journal of Political Research* 53(3): 423-442.

Baggini, Julian (2003). *Atheism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bermeo, Nancy (2016). "On Democratic Backsliding." *Journal of Democracy* 27(1): 5–19.

Boese, Vanessa A.; Nina Ilchenko; Juraj Medzihorsky & Staffan I. Lindberg (2021). "How Democracies Prevail: Democratic Resilience as a Two-stage Process." *Democratization* 28(5): 885–907.

Capoccia, Giovanni (2026). "Countering Illiberalism in Liberal Democracies: Information, Legacies, Temporalities." *Comparative Political Studies* 59(6): 1123–1165.

Chatham House (2020). *The Future of Democracy in Europe*, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/03/future-democracy-europe

Chou, Mark (2015). "From Crisis to Crisis: Democracy, Crisis and the Occupy Movement." *Political Studies Review* 13(1): 46-58.

Collier, David & Robert Adcock (1999). "Democracy and Dichotomies: A Pragmatic Approach to Choices about Concepts." *Annual Review of Political Science* 2: 537–565.

Coppedge, Michael et al. (2025). *V-Dem [Country-Year/Country-Date] Dataset v15*. Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project. https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemds25

Cornell, Agnes, Jørgen Møller, & Svend-Erik Skaaning (2020). *Democratic Stability in an Age of Crisis: Reassessing the Interwar Period*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Corzier, Michel; Samuel P. Huntington & Joji Watanuki (1975). *The Crisis of Democracy Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission*. New York: New York University Press.

CRIC (2001). *Voter Participation in Canada: Is Canadian Democracy in Crisis?* https://borealisdata.ca/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.5683/SP3/VOXBCR

Croissant, Aurel & Lars Lott (2025). "Democratic Resilience in the Twenty-First Century: Search for an Analytical Framework and Explorative Analysis." *Political Studies*. Online first. DOI: 10.1177/00323217251345779.

Dahl, Robert A. (1989). *Democracy and Its Critics*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Dalton, Russell J. (2004). *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices: The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Davenport, Christian (2007). "State Repression and Political Order." *Annual Review of Political Science* 10: 1–23.

Demokratikommissionen (2020). *Er demokratiet i krise?* https://duf.dk/fileadmin/user_upload/Editor/documents/Maerkesager/Demokratikommissionen/Demokratikommissionens_betaenkning.pdf.

Diamond, Larry (1999). *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Ercan, Selen & Jean-Paul Gagnon (2014). "The Crisis of Democracy, Which Crisis? Which Democracy?" *Democratic Theory* 1(2): 1-10.

Ferrín, Monica & Hanspeter Kriesi (eds.) (2016). *How Europeans View and Evaluate Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Foa, Roberto Stefan & Yascha Mounk (2016). "The Democratic Disconnect." *Journal of Democracy* 27(3): 5–17.

Foa, Roberto; Andrew Klassen; Micheal Slade; Alex Rand & Rosie Collins (2020). "The *Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report 2020*. Cambridge: Centre for the Future of Democracy.

Freedom House (2018). *Freedom in the World 2018: Democracy in Crisis*, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/democracy-crisis

Gallie, W.B. (1956). "Essentially Contested Concepts." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56: 167–198.

Goertz, Gary (2006). *Social Science Concepts: A User's Guide*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Graham, Matthew & Milan Svolik (2020). "Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States." *American Political Science Review* 114(2): 392–409.

Habermas, Jürgen (1975). *Legitimation Crisis*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Holmes, Stephen (1995). *Passions and Constraint: On the Theory of Liberal Democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

International IDEA (2025). *Global State of Democracy v9*, https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices/dataset-resources

Jang, Austin, and Milan W. Svolik (2025). *Support for Democracy: Attitudinal versus Revealed-Preference Measures*. Working paper, Yale University.

Johnston, Ron & Charles Pattie (2001). "Is There a Crisis of Democracy in Great Britain? Turnout at General Elections Reconsidered." Pp. 61–80 in Keith Dowding; James Hughes & Helen Margetts (eds.), *Challenges to Democracy: Ideas, Involvement and Institutions*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Katz, Richard S. (2022). "If the Cure for the Ills of Democracy Is More Democracy, Might the Cure Be Worse than the Disease?" *Scandinavian Political Studies* 45(1): 68-85.

Knutsen, Carl Henrik; Kyle L. Marquardt; Brigitte Seim; Michael Coppedge; Amanda B. Edgell; Juraj Medzihorsky; Daniel Pemstein; Jan Teorell; John Gerring & Staffan I. Lindberg (2024). "Conceptual and Measurement Issues in Assessing Democratic Backsliding." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 57(2): 162–177.

Koselleck, Reinhardt (2006). "Crisis." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67(2): 357-400.

Kriesi, HansPeter (2020). "Is There a Crisis of Democracy in Europe*?" Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 61(2): 237-260.

Levitsky, Steven & Daniel Ziblatt (2018). *How Democracies Die: What History Reveals About our Future*. New York: Viking.

Linz, Juan J. (1978). *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes. Crisis, Breakdown, & Reequilibration*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Linz, Juan J. & Alfred C. Stepan (1996). *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Little, Andrew T. & Anne Meng (2023). "Measuring Democratic Backsliding." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 56(3): 443–448.

Lührmann, Anna & Staffan I. Lindberg (2019). "A Third Wave of Autocratization Is Here: What Is New About It?" *Democratization* 26(7): 1095–1113.

Medzihorsky, Juraj & Staffan I. Lindberg (2024). "Walking the Talk: How to Identify Anti-Pluralist Parties." *Party Politics* 30(3): 420-434.

Merkel, Wolfgang (2016). "Democracies and Their Crises Reconsidered." *Democratic Theory* 3(1): 91-108.

Merkel, Wolfgang (2018). "Challenge or Crisis of Democracy." Pp. 1-28 in Wolfgang Merkel & Sascha Kneip (eds.), *Crisis and Democracy. Challenges in Turbulent Times*. Cham: Springer International.

Merkel, Wolfgang & Anna Lührmann (2021). "Resilience of Democracies: Responses to Illiberal and Authoritarian Challenges." *Democratization* 28(5): 869–884.

Miller, Michael & David Szakonyi (2022). *Authoritarian Warning Survey*, https://www.authwarningsurvey.com/

Moisés, José (2019). "On the Crisis of Democracy." *Journalism and Mass Communication* 9(1): 33-52.

Morlino, Leonardo (1998). *Democracy Between Consolidation and Crisis: Parties, Groups, and Citizens in Southern Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Møller, Jørgen & Svend-Erik Skaaning (2024). *Democratization and Autocratization in Comparative Perspective: Concepts, Currents, Causes, Consequences, and Challenges*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Mudde, Cas, & Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017). *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Munck, Gerardo L. (2009). *Measuring Democracy: A Bridge between Scholarship and Politics*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Norris, Pippa (ed.) (1999). *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Governance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Norris, Pippa (2011). *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Offe, Claus (1972). *Strukturprobleme des kapitalistischen Staates*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

Pappas, Takis S. (2016). "Modern Populism: Research Advances, Conceptual and Methodological Pitfalls, and the Minimal Definition." In *Politics: Oxford Research Encyclopedia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pildes, Richard H. (2021). "The Age of Political Fragmentation." *Journal of Democracy* 32(4): 146–159.

Popper, Karl (1999[1987]). *All Life is Problem Solving*. London: Routledge.

Przeworski, Adam (1999). "Minimalist Conception of Democracy: A Defense." Pp. 23-55 in Ian Shapiro & Casiano Hacker-Cordón (eds.), *Democracy's Value*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Przeworski, Adam (2019). *Crises of Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Schumpeter, J.A. (1974 [1942]). *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. London: Unwin University Books.

Sartori, Giovanni (1987), *The Theory of Democracy Revisited*, New Jersey: Chatham House Publishers.

Snagovsky, Feodor & Annika Werner (2024). "Using Survey Experiments for Construct Validation: 'Strong Leader' Questions and Support for Authoritarian Leadership." *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 35(6): 1-21.

Spittler, Marcus (2018). "Are Right-Wing Populist Parties a Threat to Democracy?" Pp. 1-28 in Wolfgang Merkel & Sascha Kneip (eds.), *Crisis and Democracy. Challenges in Turbulent Times*. Cham: Springer International.

Svensson, Palle (1986). "Stability, Crisis and Breakdown: Some Notes on the Concept of Crisis in Political Analysis." *Scandinavian Political Studies* 9(2): 129-139.

Tormey, Simon (2014). "The Contemporary Crisis of Representative Democracy." *Democratic Theory* 1(2): 104–112.

Van der Meer, Tom W.G. (2017). "Political Trust and the 'Crisis of Democracy.'" Oxford Research Encyclopedias: Politics. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

van Ham, Carolien; Jacques Thomassen; Kees Aarts & Rudy Andeweget (2017). *Myth and Reality of the Legitimacy Crisis: Explaining Trends and Cross-National Differences in Established Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Vittori, Davide (2022). "Threat or Corrective? Assessing the Impact of Populist Parties in Government on the Qualities of Democracy: A 19-Country Comparison." *Government and Opposition* 57(4), 589-609.

Waldner, David & Ellen Lust (2018). "Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding." *Annual Review of Political Science* 21: 93–113.

Welzel, Christian; Stefan Kruse & Lennart Brunkert (2022). "Why the Future Is (Still) Democratic." *Journal of Democracy* 33(1): 156-162.

Wüttke, Alexander; Konstantin Gavras & Harald Schoen (2021). "Have Europeans Grown Tired of Democracy? New Evidence from 18 Consolidated Democracies, 1981-2018." *British Journal of Political Science* 52(1): 416-428.

Online Appendix: On the Conceptualization and Measurement of Democratic Crisis

GSoD constitutive democracy indicators and the Level Index

The GSoD dataset (International IDEA 2025) provides several advantages for our purposes. First, the subindices we use as indicators are explicitly grounded in a transparent and elaborated conceptual framework following strict concept–indicator consistency criteria when linking concepts with empirical measures. Second, they aggregate a diverse set of original indicators from different kinds of sources and measurement procedures (such as V-Dem, Freedom House, Bertelsmann Transformation Index, Lexical Index of Electoral Democracy, Civil Liberties Dataset, and Polity) based on an item response theory (IRT) model or Bayesian factor analysis (BFA), thereby enhancing reliability and reducing dependence on single measures and data providers. Third, GSoD's construction of subindices ensures broad country and temporal coverage, both of which are essential for cross-national crisis assessment.

To measure the Level Index, we make use of seven subindices: Credible Elections, Inclusive Suffrage, Free Political Parties, Elected Government, Freedom of Association and Assembly, Freedom of Expression, and Freedom of the Press. The first four subindices capture the extent to which political power is allocated through free, competitive, and inclusive electoral processes. The latter three subindices capture the institutionalized liberties that make electoral competition possible and protect citizens' capacities to form preferences, organize politically, and access independent information during and between elections.

Note: ES = expert surveys; IC = standards-based in-house coding; CM = composite measure; OD = observational data.

Table A1: Indicators of Credible Elections

Indicator	Description/question	Dataset
EMB autonomy (v2elembaut)	ES: Does the election management body (EMB) have autonomy from government to apply election laws and administrative rules impartially in national elections?	V-Dem
EMB capacity (v2elembcap)	ES: Does the election management body (EMB) have sufficient staff and resources to administer a well-run national election?	V-Dem
Election other voting irregularities (v2elirreg)	ES: In this national election, was there evidence of other intentional irregularities by incumbent and/or opposition parties and/or vote fraud?	V-Dem
Election government intimidation (v2elintim)	ES: In this national election, were opposition candidates/parties/campaign workers subjected to repression, intimidation, violence or harassment by the government, the ruling party or their agents?	V-Dem

Indicator	Description/question	Dataset
Election free and fair (v2elfrfair)	ES: Taking all aspects of the pre-election period, election day and the post-election process into account, would you consider this national election to be free and fair?	V-Dem
Competition (competitive elections)	IC: The chief executive offices and seats in the effective legislative body are filled by elections characterized by uncertainty, meaning the elections are sufficiently free to enable the opposition to gain power if they were to attract sufficient support from the electorate.	LIED
Electoral Process (A3)	IC: Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?	Freedom in the World
Political Pluralism and Participation (B2)	IC: Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?	Freedom in the World
Political Pluralism and Participation (B3)	IC: Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?	Freedom in the World
Free and fair elections (elect)	IC: Ten-point scale ranging from 'National elections, if held at all, are entirely unfree and unfair' to 'There are no constraints on free and fair elections'.	BTI

Table A2: Indicators of Inclusive Suffrage

Indicator	Description/question	Dataset
Suffrage (v2elsuffrage)	OD: What percentage (%) of adult citizens (as defined by statute) has the legal right to vote in national elections?	V-Dem
Election voter registry (v2elrgstry)	ES: In this national election, was there a reasonably accurate voter registry in place and was it used?	V-Dem

Table A3: Indicators of Free Political Parties

Indicator	Description/question	Dataset
Party ban (v2psparban)	ES: Are any parties banned?	V-Dem
Barriers to parties (v2psbars)	ES: How restrictive are the barriers to forming a party?	V-Dem
Opposition parties' autonomy (v2psoppaut)	ES: Are opposition parties independent and autonomous of the ruling regime?	V-Dem
Elections multiparty (v2elmulpar)	ES: Was this national election multiparty?	V-Dem
Competitiveness of participation (parcomp)	IC: The competitiveness of participation refers to the extent to which alternative preferences for policy and leadership can be pursued in the political arena.	Polity
Multiparty elections (multiparty legislative elections)	OD: The lower house of the legislature is elected by voters facing more than one choice. Parties are not banned and (a) more than one party is allowed to compete or (b) elections are nonpartisan.	LIED
Political Pluralism and Participation (B1)	IC: Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?	Freedom in the World

Table A4: Indicators of Elected Government

Indicator	Description/question	Dataset
Elected officials index (v2x_elecoff)	CM: Are the chief executive and legislature appointed through popular elections? Based on 16 variables from expert survey data, in-house coded data, and observational data.	V-Dem
Competitiveness of executive recruitment (xrcomp)	IC: Competitiveness refers to the extent that prevailing modes of advancement give subordinates equal opportunities to become superordinates.	Polity
Openness of executive recruitment (xropen)	IC: Recruitment of the chief executive is open to the extent that all the politically active population has an opportunity, in principle, to attain the position through a regularized process.	Polity
Electoral	IC: Does a country have no regular elections, elections in an effectively one-party state, elections with opposition parties but without an actual chance of government change, or full democracy?	Bjørnskov and Rode
Electoral Process (A1)	IC: Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?	Freedom in the World
Electoral Process (A2)	IC: Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?	Freedom in the World
Functioning of Government (C1)	IC: Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?	Freedom in the World
Lexical index of electoral democracy (lexical_index_plus)	IC: Electoral democracy operationalized as a series of necessary-and-sufficient conditions arrayed in an ordinal scale, identifying unique and theoretically meaningful regime types.	LIED

Table A5: Indicators of Freedom of Expression

Indicator	Description/question	Dataset
Freedom of discussion for women (v2cldiscw)	ES: Are women able to openly discuss political issues in private homes and in public spaces?	V-Dem
Freedom of discussion for men (v2cldiscm)	ES: Are men able to openly discuss political issues in private homes and in public spaces?	V-Dem
Freedom of academic and cultural expression (v2clacfree)	ES: Is there academic freedom and freedom of cultural expression related to political issues?	V-Dem
Freedom of opinion and expression (freexp)	IC: The extent to which individual citizens, groups and the media have freedom of opinion and expression, including the right to seek, obtain and pass on information on political issues without being subject to actual limitations or restrictions.	CLD
Obstacles to access (A)	IC: Details infrastructural, economic, and political barriers to access; government decisions to shut off connectivity or block specific applications; legal, regulatory, and ownership control over Internet service providers; and the independence of regulatory bodies.	Freedom on the Net
Limits on content (B)	IC: Analyses legal regulations on content; technical filtering and blocking of websites; other forms of censorship and self-censorship; the vibrancy and diversity of online information space; and the use of digital tools for civic mobilization.	Freedom on the Net
Violations of user rights (C)	IC: Tackles legal protections and restrictions on free expression; surveillance and privacy; and legal and extralegal repercussions for online speech and activities, such as imprisonment, cyberattacks, or extralegal harassment and physical violence.	Freedom on the Net
Freedom of Expression and Belief (D3)	IC: Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?	Freedom in the World
Freedom of Expression and Belief (D4)	IC: Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?	Freedom in the World

Indicator	Description/question	Dataset
Freedom of expression (express)	IC: Ten-point scale ranging from 'Freedom of expression is denied. Independent media do not exist or are prohibited' to 'Freedom of expression is guaranteed against interference or government restrictions. Individuals, groups and the press can fully exercise these rights'.	BTI

Table A6: Indicators of Freedom of the Press

Indicator	Description/question	Dataset
Print/broadcast censorship effort (v2mecenefm)	ES: Does the government directly or indirectly attempt to censor the print or broadcast media?	V-Dem
Harassment of journalists (v2meharjrn)	ES: Are individual journalists harassed, i.e. threatened with libel, arrested, imprisoned, beaten or killed, by governmental or powerful non-governmental actors while engaged in legitimate journalistic activities?	V-Dem
Media self-censorship (v2meslfcen)	ES: Is there self-censorship among journalists when reporting on issues that the government considers politically sensitive?	V-Dem
Print/broadcast media critical (v2mecrit)	ES: Of the major print and broadcast outlets, how many routinely criticize the government?	V-Dem
Print/broadcast media perspectives (v2merange)	ES: Do the major print and broadcast media represent a wide range of political perspectives?	V-Dem
Media bias (v2mebias)	ES: Is there media bias against opposition parties or candidates?	V-Dem
Media corrupt (v2mecorrpt)	ES: Do journalists, publishers or broadcasters accept payments in exchange for altering news coverage?	V-Dem
Media freedom	IC: Is criticism of government and government officials a common and normal part of the political dialogue in the mediated public sphere?	Media Freedom Data
Freedom of Expression and Belief (D1)	IC: Are there free and independent media?	Freedom in the World

Table A7: Indicators of Freedom of Association and Assembly

Indicator	Description/question	Dataset
CSO entry and exit (v2cseeorgs)	ES: To what extent does the government achieve control over entry and exit by civil society organizations into public life?	V-Dem
CSO repression (v2csreprss)	ES: Does the government attempt to repress civil society organizations?	V-Dem
Freedom of peaceful assembly (v2caassemb)	ES: To what extent do state authorities respect and protect the right of peaceful assembly?	V-Dem
Freedom of association and assembly (freass)	IC: The extent to which individuals and groups have freedom of assembly and association, including the right to gather freely, carry out peaceful demonstrations, and join political parties, cultural organizations, or trade unions without being subject to actual limitations or restrictions.	CLD
Associational and Organizational Rights (E1)	IC: Is there freedom of assembly?	Freedom in the World
Associational and Organizational Rights (E2)	IC: Is there freedom for non-governmental organizations, particularly those engaged in human rights- and governance-related work?	Freedom in the World
Associational and Organizational Rights (E3)	IC: Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labour organizations?	Freedom in the World
Association/assembly rights (assembly)	IC: Ten-point scale ranging from 'Association and assembly rights are denied. Independent civic groups do not exist or are prohibited' to	BTI

Indicator	Description/question	Dataset
	'Association and assembly rights are guaranteed against interference or government restrictions. Residents and civic groups can fully exercise these rights'.	

Indicator selection for Hazard Intensity

The Hazard Intensity Index draws on six subdimensions reflecting pressures on the two foundational concerns of liberal democratic theory: institutional restraint and mutual toleration. The selection of indicators for each subdimension is documented in Tables A8–A13 below.

Weaknesses in parliamentary constraints are captured through the indicators in Table A8 (Effective Parliament). Weaknesses in judicial constraints are captured through Table A9 (Judicial Independence), while violent state repression is measured using Table A10 (Personal Integrity and Security). Disrespect for political opponents and democratic norms is captured in Table A11. Active support for anti-pluralist organizations is measured using Table A12 (Anti-Pluralism). Anti-democratic mobilization and political violence are captured through Table A13.

To reduce noise and ensure balanced representation of underlying concepts, we combine indicators that reflect the same subdimension before constructing the overall Hazard Intensity Index. Taking simple averages within subdimensions: judicial constraints combine GSoD judicial independence with V-Dem's executive constitutional compliance; disrespect for democratic norms combines the V-Dem measures in Table A11; and violent mobilization combines the ACLED-derived indicator and the V-Dem measures in Table A13. These intermediate measures reduce redundancy among highly correlated items, minimize idiosyncratic variation in single indicators, and align the inputs more directly with conceptually coherent hazard dimensions.

Table A8: Indicators of Effective Parliament

Indicator	Description/question	Dataset
Legislature questions officials in practice (v2lgqstexp)	ES: In practice, does the legislature routinely question executive branch officials?	V-Dem
Executive oversight (v2lgotovst)	ES: If executive branch officials were engaged in unconstitutional, illegal or unethical activity, how likely is it that a body other than the legislature (such as a comptroller general, general prosecutor or ombudsman) would question or investigate them and issue an unfavourable decision or report?	V-Dem
Legislature investigates in practice (v2lginvstp)	ES: If the executive were engaged in unconstitutional, illegal or unethical activity, how likely is it that a legislative body would	V-Dem

Indicator	Description/question	Dataset
	conduct an investigation that would result in a decision or report unfavourable to the executive?	
Legislature opposition parties (v2lgoppart)	ES: Are opposition parties (those not in the ruling party or coalition) able to exercise oversight and investigatory functions against the wishes of the governing party or coalition?	V-Dem
Executive constraints (xconst)	IC: The extent of institutionalized constraints on the decision making powers of chief executives, whether individuals or collectivities.	Polity

Table A9: Indicators of Judicial Independence

Indicator	Description/question	Dataset
High Court independence (v2juhcind)	ES: When the High Court is ruling in cases salient to the government, how often does it make decisions that merely reflect government wishes regardless of its sincere view of the legal record?	V-Dem
Lower court independence (v2juncind)	ES: When judges not on the High Court are ruling in cases salient to the government, how often do their decisions merely reflect government wishes regardless of their sincere view of the legal record?	V-Dem
Compliance with High Court (v2juhccomp)	ES: How often does the government comply with important decisions of the High Court with which it disagrees?	V-Dem
Compliance with judiciary (v2jucomp)	ES: How often does the government comply with important decisions by other courts with which it disagrees?	V-Dem
Rule of Law (F1)	IC: Is there an independent judiciary?	Freedom in the World
Separation of power (separation)	IC: Ten-point scale ranging from 'There is no separation of powers, neither de jure nor de facto' to 'There is a clear separation of powers with mutual checks and balances'.	BTI
Independent judiciary (judiciary)	IC: Ten-point scale ranging from 'The judiciary is not independent and not institutionally differentiated' to 'The judiciary is independent and free both from unconstitutional intervention by other institutions and from corruption. It is institutionally differentiated, and there are mechanisms for judicial review of legislative or executive acts'.	BTI

Table A10: Indicators of Personal Integrity and Security

Indicator	Description/question	Dataset
Freedom from torture (v2cltort)	ES: Is there freedom from torture?	V-Dem
Freedom from political killings (v2clkill)	ES: Is there freedom from political killings?	V-Dem
Political terror scale (PTSsd)	IC: What is the level of political violence and terror?	Gibney et al.
Internal conflict (D)	ES: Is there political violence in the country? The rating is the sum of three subcomponents: civil war/coup threat, terrorism/political violence and civil disorder.	ICRG
Physical integrity rights index (physint)	IC: Additive Index ranging from 0 (no government respect for the prohibition of torture, extrajudicial killing, political imprisonment and disappearance) to 8 (full government respect for these four rights).	CIRIGHTS
Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights (G4)	IC: Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?	Freedom in the World
Rule of Law (F3)	IC: Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?	Freedom in the World

Table A11: Indicators of Disrespect for Democratic Norms

Indicator	Description/question	Dataset
Political polarization (v2cacamps)	ES: Is society polarized into antagonistic, political camps? Refers to the extent to which political differences affect social relationships beyond political discussions; societies are highly polarized if supporters of opposing camps are reluctant to engage in friendly interactions in family, civic, and professional settings.	V-Dem
Political parties hate speech (v2smpolhate)	ES: How often do major political parties use hate speech as part of their rhetoric? Hate speech is any speech intended to insult, offend, or intimidate members of specific groups defined by race, religion, sexual orientation, national origin, disability, or similar trait.	V-Dem
Respect counterarguments (v2dlcountr)	ES: When important policy changes are being considered, to what extent do political elites acknowledge and respect counterarguments? Based on the style most typical of prominent national political leaders.	V-Dem

Table A12: Indicators of Anti-Pluralism

Indicator	Description/question	Dataset
Anti-Pluralism Index (v2xpa_antiplural)	CM: To what extent does the party show a lacking commitment to democratic norms prior to elections? We include parties at or above the 0.35 threshold, which marks the level at which parties adopt positions rejecting fundamental democratic norms, including the legitimacy of political opponents and minority rights.	V-Party

Table A13: Indicators of Anti-Democratic Mobilization and Political Violence

Indicator	Description/question	Dataset
Political violence (v2caviol)	ES: How often have non-state actors used political violence against persons this year? Covers politically oriented militias and youth groups, even those informally affiliated with the ruling party. Excludes profit-driven crime-related violence and psychological or symbolic violence.	V-Dem
Mobilization for autocracy (v2caautmob)	ES: In this year, how frequent and large have events of mass mobilization for pro-autocratic aims been? Events are pro-autocratic if organized in support of non-democratic rulers, forms of government, or leaders that undermine democratic ideas and institutions such as the rule of law, free and fair elections, or media freedom.	V-Dem
Violent demonstrations	OD: Reflects the number and severity of violent demonstrations (score 1–5; 1 = infrequent, 5 = frequent with high fatalities). Includes four ACLED event types weighted by severity: Protest with intervention (1), Excessive force against protesters (2), Violent demonstration (3), Mob violence (4). Fatalities are weighted more heavily than number of incidents.	ACLED/GPI

Sources of alternative crisis indicators (Table 3)

The table below documents the exact questions, scales, and data sources for the six alternative crisis indicators used in Table 3 of the main text. All EVS/WVS items are drawn from the Joint EVS/WVS 2017–2022 Dataset.

Table A14: Sources of Alternative Crisis Indicators

Indicator	Question/Description	Source
Turnout	In this national election, what percentage (%) of all registered voters cast a vote according to official results?	Coppedge et al. (2025)
Vote share populist parties	Vote share for populist parties in the most recent elections. For countries not covered by the primary source, populist parties are identified via the V-Party dataset (parties scoring above .5 on the Populism Index).	Grzymala-Busse & McFaul (2024); Lindberg et al. (2022)
Importance of democracy	Percentage answering 8–10 on a 1–10 scale. Question: "How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically?" (1 = Not at all important; 10 = Absolutely important).	Joint EVS/WVS 2017–2022 (EVS 2022; Haerpfer et al. 2022)
Support for strong leader	Percentage answering Very good or Fairly good. Question: "Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections."	Joint EVS/WVS 2017–2022 (EVS 2022; Haerpfer et al. 2022)
Confidence in parliament	Percentage answering "A great deal" or "Quite a lot." Question: "How much confidence do you have in [Parliament]?"	Joint EVS/WVS 2017–2022 (EVS 2022; Haerpfer et al. 2022)
Satisfaction with political system	Percentage answering 8–10 on a 1–10 scale. Question: "How satisfied are you with how the political system is functioning in your country these days?" (1 = Not satisfied at all; 10 = Completely satisfied).	Joint EVS/WVS 2017–2022 (EVS 2022; Haerpfer et al. 2022)

Figures

Figure A1: Fulfilment of democratic attributes

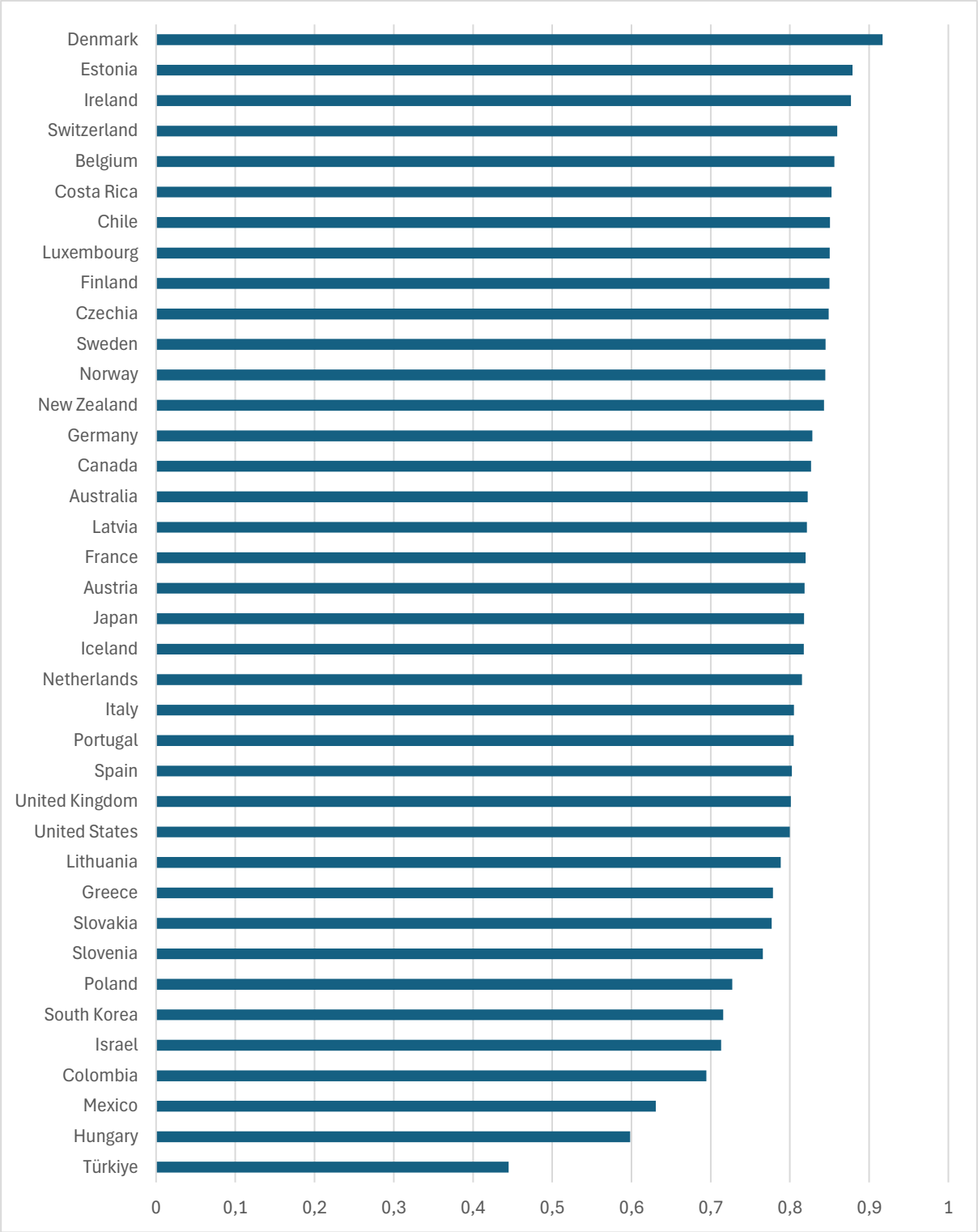


Figure A2: Hazard Intensity

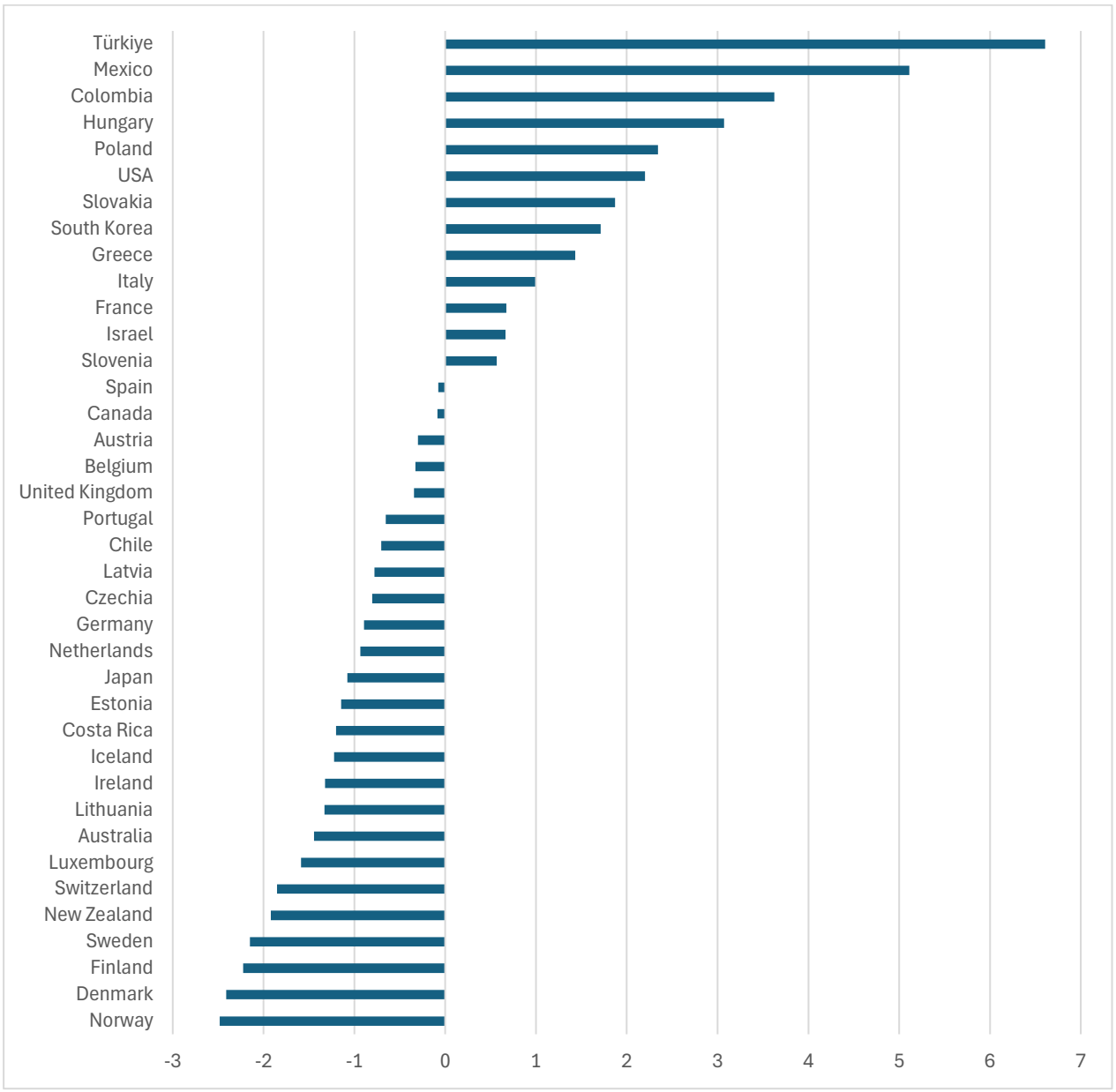
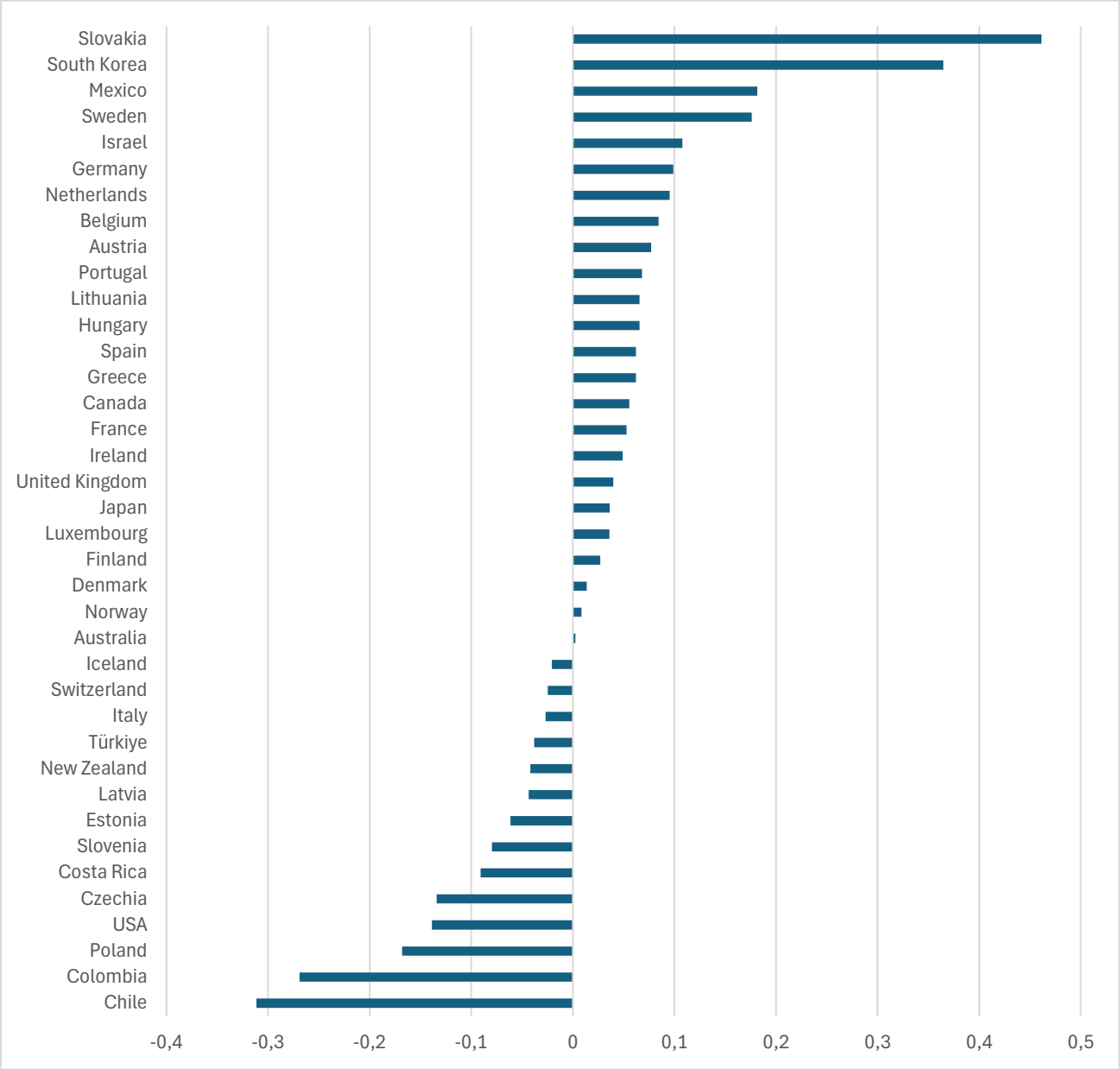


Figure A3: Hazard Trend



References

Coppedge, Michael, John Gerring, Carl Henrik Knutsen, Staffan I. Lindberg, Jan Teorell, David Altman, Fabio Angiolillo, Michael Bernhard, Agnes Cornell, M. Steven Fish, Linnea Fox, Lisa Gastaldi, Haakon Gjerløw, Adam Glynn, Ana Good God, Allen Hicken, Katrin Kinzelbach, Kyle L. Marquardt, Kelly McMann, Valeriya Mechkova, Anja Neundorf, Pamela Paxton, Daniel Pemstein, Josefine Pernes, Johannes von Römer, Brigitte Seim, Rachel Sigman, Svend-Erik Skaaning, Jeffrey Staton, Aksel Sundström, Marcus Tannenberg, Eitan Tzelgov, Yi-ting Wang, Tore Wig, and Daniel Ziblattet al. (2025). *V-Dem [Country-Year/Country-Date] Dataset v15*. Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project. https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemds25

EVS (2022). *European Values Study 2017: Integrated Dataset (EVS 2017)*. GESIS Data Archive, Cologne. ZA7500 Data file Version 5.0.0, doi:10.4232/1.14320

Grzymala-Busse, Anna and Michael McFaul (2024). Global Populisms Project, Stanford University. Votes for Populists Dataset (September 2024). https://fsi.stanford.edu/global-populisms/content/vote-populists.

Haerpfer, C., Inglehart, R., Moreno, A., Welzel, C., Kizilova, K., Diez-Medrano, J., Lagos, M., Norris, P., Ponarin, E. & Puranen, B. (eds.) (2022). World Values Survey: Round Seven – Country-Pooled Datafile. Madrid & Vienna: JD Systems Institute & WVSA Secretariat. Version 5.0.0, doi:10.14281/18241.24.

Institute of Economics and Peace (2025). *Global Peace Index*. https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/GPI-2024-web.pdf

International IDEA (2025). *Global State of Democracy v9*. https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices/dataset-resources

Lindberg, Staffan I., Nils Düpont, Masaaki Higashijima, Yaman Berker Kavasoglu, Kyle L. Marquardt, Michael Bernhard, Holger Döring, Allen Hicken, Melis Laebens, Juraj Medzihorsky, Anja Neundorf, Ora John Reuter, Saskia Ruth–Lovell, Keith R. Weghorst, Nina Wiesehomeier, Joseph Wright, Nazifa Alizada, Paul Bederke, Lisa Gastaldi, Sandra Grahn, Garry Hindle, Nina Ilchenko, Johannes von Römer, Steven Wilson, Daniel Pemstein, and Brigitte Seim (2022). *Codebook Varieties of Party Identity and Organization (V-Party) V2*. Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project. https://doi.org/10.23696/vpartydsv2

Medzihorsky, Juraj & Staffan I. Lindberg (2024). ”Walking the Talk: How to Identify Anti-Pluralist Parties.” *Party Politics* 30(3): 420–434.