Editorial: Exploring the global erosion of democracy: understanding multicausal threats and international dynamics

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Editorial on the Research Topic
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Introduction

The guiding idea of this Research Topic was to examine the global erosion of democracy from a comparative perspective that recognizes its multiple causes and the international dynamics that sustain it. We aimed to recruit papers that move beyond reductionist interpretations attributing the phenomenon solely to domestic variables, and instead highlight how international trade, social media, political leadership, regional integration, and the actions—or inactions—of external actors intersect with national issues to create a global scenario in which democracy is increasingly under pressure.

Against this background, the articles in this Research Topic demonstrate the timeliness and relevance of this approach. Each contribution addresses at least one of the proposed lines of inquiry, including the role of digital technologies in polarization, democracy as a norm in diverse political and commercial settings, the limits of regional initiatives to restore democracy, and the adaptability of non-democratic regimes in the digital age. Their thematic and geographical diversity invites constructive dialogue, presenting a mosaic of perspectives that reveals how threats to democracy emerge from different sources yet converge into global patterns.

The contributions

The five articles in this Research Topic are presented below without any particular order of importance or hierarchy, each contributing a distinct perspective on the global erosion of democracy.

The first article, *Observer States and Interregional Trade between Asia and Latin America* (Moreno León and Rouvinski), is the first study in the academic literature to

examine the status of observer states in connection with international norms—most notably democracy. Focusing on Asia–Latin America relations and regional integration, it shows that these links, far from being merely economic, generate dependencies that shape states' democratic capacities, either by reinforcing democratic governance practices or by deepening asymmetries that restrict participation and oversight. This contribution underscores how economic factors and institutional arrangements can function as crucial vectors of democratic erosion.

The second article, *From Deliberation to Acclamation: How Did Twitter's Algorithms Foster Polarized Communities and Undermine Democracy in the 2020 US Presidential Election* (Morales et al.), examines how social media influences democratic polarization through the case of the United States. It shows how digital platforms amplify extreme discourses, erode trust in institutions, and accelerate social fragmentation. Beyond the U.S. case, the article demonstrates that the communicative architecture of social media constitutes a transversal threat to contemporary democracies, fostering the viralization of messages that undermine rational deliberation and entrench disinformation.

The third article, *The EU Democracy Policy in Latin America: Narrative and Funding* (Povse and Chaguaceda Noriega), examines the European Union's democracy promotion efforts in Latin America. It identifies a sharp gap between a discourse that proclaims support for democratic values and a practice marked by insufficient funding and weak instruments. This contrast highlights the limits of international action when rhetoric outweighs material commitment, showing how external actors may unintentionally erode democracy by undermining their own credibility.

The fourth article, *Peru's Leadership in the Lima Group: Emergence and Failure (2015–2021)* (Vidarte Arévalo and Rivas Huerta), analyzes Peru's role in the creation and decline of the Lima Group as a regional response to the Venezuelan crisis. It demonstrates how a combination of international dynamics (geopolitical reconfiguration, U.S. and Chinese interests) and domestic challenges (political instability, migration, and the COVID-19 pandemic) led to the mechanism's disarticulation. This case illustrates how threats to democracy in one country can quickly evolve into regional and multilateral crises.

The fifth article, *How Online Focusing Events Influence Policy Agenda Setting in China: A Qualitative Comparative Analysis* (Li and Ma), introduces Asia's authoritarian context into the debate. It shows that in China, digitalization does not foster democratization but functions as a tool of regime control and resilience. By examining online political events, the study demonstrates how digital participation can be strategically channeled to reinforce state legitimacy and manipulate the public agenda. This contribution underscores that democratic erosion occurs not only in fragile democracies but also through the technological consolidation of authoritarian regimes.

What have we learned?

The studies in this Research Topic span a wide range of countries and regions, underscoring that democratic erosion is a global phenomenon with diverse manifestations. Latin America features prominently in three contributions, which examine Asia's

trade ties with the region in the context of democratic norms, the European Union's democracy policy toward Latin America, and the failure of the Lima Group in addressing the Venezuelan crisis. The United States exemplifies the dynamics of digital polarization, while China serves as a case study of authoritarian resilience in the era of hyperconnectivity. Together, these regional perspectives provide a comprehensive understanding of how diverse threats converge into a global dynamic of democratic erosion.

Now, in Asia and beyond, we observe how authoritarian resilience is increasingly intertwined with the global digital order. The Chinese case shows that technological innovation can be harnessed not to liberalize, but to reinforce regime control and legitimacy. Similar dynamics are visible in other parts of the world, where states experiment with digital tools to consolidate power, restrict pluralism, or manipulate the public agenda. These developments remind us that democratic erosion is not confined to fragile democracies; it also advances through the strategic adaptation of authoritarian regimes to the hyperconnected age.

In relation to Europe, the findings highlight the paradox between normative ambitions and practical limitations. While the European Union has long presented itself as a global promoter of democracy, the gap between discourse and material commitment undermines its credibility abroad. This discrepancy not only weakens the EU's influence in regions such as Latin America but also reveals broader tensions within Europe's own democratic project, where internal challenges—from populism to shrinking civic spaces—mirror the very trends the Union seeks to counter internationally, which might be understood as expressions of democratic backsliding events nowadays.t the same time, a broader analysis is necessary to fully grasp the multifaceted nature of these threats (Pino Uribe et al., 2024). On the one hand, international and technological factors play a decisive role in undermining institutions; on the other, ideological and cultural disputes within each country reshape the meaning and legitimacy of democracy itself. In Latin America, vulnerabilities emerge from the intersection of global dynamics—such as political interdependence and algorithmic mediation—with internal conflicts between resurgent right- and left-wing movements. This convergence of forces not only deepens our understanding of the risks and challenges the region faces but also highlights Latin America's strategic role in the global debate on defending and reinventing democracy in the twenty-first century.

Future directions in this Research Topic

In light of the ongoing erosion of democracy, it is essential to develop effective strategies to counter this global trend. A thorough examination of the multifaceted local, regional, and international factors driving democratic decline remains crucial, with the recognition that no singular or linear solution exists. What is needed is a comprehensive agenda that links trade regulation with democratic principles, strengthens institutions against the disruptive influence of social media, ensures coherence between the rhetoric and actions of international actors, and revitalizes regional cooperation mechanisms. Moreover, it is necessary to account for the role of authoritarian regimes in shaping global

and regional dynamics, as illustrated, for instance, by the case of Russia's influence in Latin America (Noriega and Rouvinski, 2023). Only by acknowledging these complexities can effective responses be designed to halt institutional erosion and renew democratic commitments for the twenty-first century.

The relationship between democratic erosion and political reconfiguration will remain a central theme of scholarly inquiry in the years ahead. This continuity is not only due to the intensification of deinstitutionalization, polarization, and crises of representation, but also because comparable patterns are emerging across diverse contexts. The interplay between global and local dynamics requires a rethinking of classical analytical categories in political science, international relations, and international law—such as legitimacy, accountability, and citizen participation. Such rethinking is essential in a world shaped by the transnational circulation of discourses, the growing influence of digital platforms, and the increasing role of non-state actors in political life. Examining national cases with global repercussions, as well as international processes with local effects, thus emerges as a privileged lens for understanding how democracies are being reshaped today.

Future research agendas could advance in at least five complementary directions. First, comparative analyses of national experiences are necessary to identify both the similarities and differences in the processes of institutional erosion. Secondly, the integration of mixed methodologies—combining social media studies, discourse analysis, and public opinion research—is employed to capture the complexity of contemporary political dynamics. Thirdly, there is the exploration of intersections among political communication, social movements, and emerging forms of digital authoritarianism (Conversi, 2012). Fourthly, the analysis of how the political economy of an interconnected world and international norms shape democratic resilience or erosion, particularly through their influence on states' policy choices and external alignments. Fifth, it is imperative to examine the integration of generative artificial intelligence into varied political processes, acknowledging both the opportunities and risks, since its growing influence can no longer be overlooked in debates on democratic erosion and resilience.

Taken together, the contributions to this Research Topic demonstrate that democratic erosion is not the product of isolated national crises but a global phenomenon shaped by the interaction of local, regional, and international dynamics. By highlighting the roles of trade, digital technologies, political leadership, regional

mechanisms, and authoritarian adaptation, the articles illustrate how diverse forces converge to challenge democratic institutions worldwide. This Research Topic not only advances comparative research on the multicausal nature of democratic backsliding but also underscores the urgency of developing innovative strategies to defend and renew democracy in the twenty-first century. In doing so, it consolidates a growing field of study and offers valuable insights for designing public policies and strategies to strengthen democracy in an era of global uncertainty.

Author contributions

AA: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. VR: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Validation.

Conflict of interest

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