

RESEARCH BRIEF #104

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Democratic Erosion Predicts Rising Deaths from Drug Poisoning and Infectious Disease

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KEY FINDINGS

- Democratic erosion (particularly erosion in free and fair elections) in a U.S. state predicts rising deaths among adults 25-64 years.
- Democratic erosion most strongly predicts rising deaths from drug poisoning and infectious disease. It also predicts deaths from suicide and homicide.
- Strengthening democracy in all states may save thousands of lives each year.

Strong democratic functioning benefits population health.¹ International studies assert that strong democracies benefit population health by investing in peoples’ education and economic wellbeing, reducing inequality, providing stability, reducing violent crime, fostering social cohesion, and more. In recent decades, democratic functioning has eroded in many U.S. states.² The erosion was pronounced for one aspect of democratic functioning—electoral democracy, which refers to free and fair elections.² Examples of erosion in free and fair elections include partisan gerrymandering, voter disenfranchisement, and weak campaign finance laws. Figure 1 shows how electoral democracy slowly (e.g., OK) or abruptly (e.g., NC) eroded in some states, fluctuated in others (e.g., MI), increased in some (e.g., AZ), or changed little (e.g., IA). The striking erosion of electoral democracy in some states may have contributed to the high and rising death rates among working-age adults.

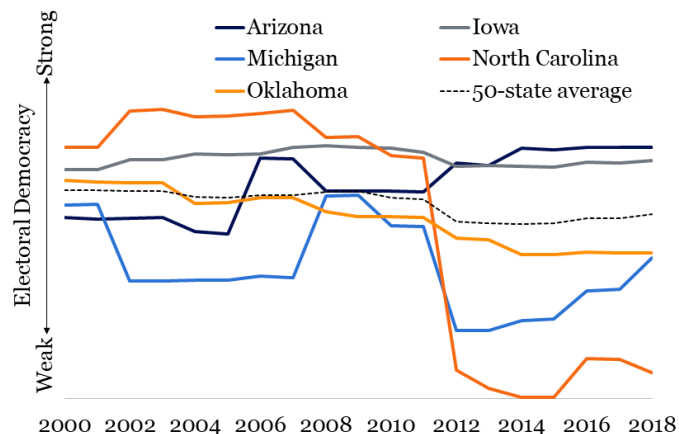


Figure 1. Trends in Electoral Democracy
 Data Source: Grumbach.²

This brief summarizes findings from our [study](#)³ examining how changes in electoral democracy in the 50 states predicted changes in the risk of death among adults ages 25-64 during 2000-2019. It used a measure of electoral democracy called the State Democracy Index.² It used vital statistics data on deaths from all causes and from heart disease, cancer, suicide, homicide, drug poisoning, and infectious disease.

Strengthening Electoral Democracy Can Save Lives

If a state were to strengthen its electoral democracy from a moderate level to high level, our study estimated that, within the next year, men’s all-cause mortality would be 2.0% lower, as shown in Figure 2. If a state strengthened its electoral democracy from a moderate to very high level, men’s all-cause mortality would be an estimated 3.2% lower. These differences are statistically significant. The benefit of strengthening democracy was mainly in reduced drug poisoning and infectious disease deaths. If a state strengthened its electoral democracy from a moderate level to a very high level, deaths from these causes may decline by an estimated 13%. Electoral democracy was also an important predictor of women’s mortality, especially for drug poisoning and infectious disease, but also for suicide and homicide (see [published paper](#)).

If all states strengthened their electoral democracy from a moderate to very high level, over 20,000 working-age deaths could potentially be averted each year. To put this in perspective, 20,410 working-age adults died from cerebrovascular disease (i.e., stroke) in 2019.

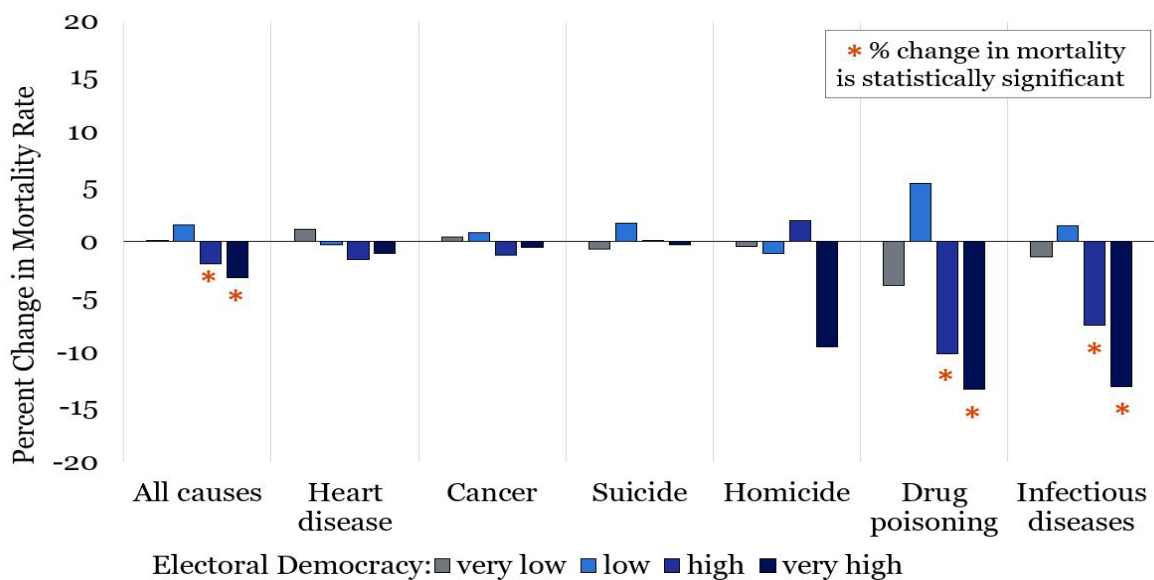


Figure 2: Change in Men’s Mortality Rate One Year After their State’s Electoral Democracy Changed from a Moderate Level to a Very Low, Low, High, or Very High Level, 2000-2019

Data Source: See [Montez, Cheng, and Grumbach](#).³

Our also study examined three ways that US states’ electoral democracy may affect mortality—economic conditions, social conditions, and health behaviors. The most important explanation was social conditions. Specifically, democratic erosion predicted higher violent crime and incarceration rates which, in turn, predicted higher mortality.

State and Federal Laws Must Ensure Free and Fair Elections

In 2021, the Brennan Center for Justice warned that free and fair elections increasingly depend on which state a person lives and that this divergence will continue unless Congress acts.⁵ That same year, more than 150 scholars of U.S. democracy signed a document imploring Congress to pass the Freedom to Vote Act and, if necessary, suspend the Senate filibuster so that a simple majority would be necessary to pass it.⁶ The signatories warned that failure to pass it would “undermine the minimum condition for electoral democracy—free and fair elections—[and] have grave consequences not only for our democracy, but for political order, economic prosperity, and the national security of the United States as well.” To this list of grave consequences, our study³ adds premature death. Both state and federal efforts—such as banning partisan gerrymandering, improving voter enfranchisement, and reforming campaign finance laws—to restore and improve electoral democracy are urgently needed.

Data and Methods

Annual data on deaths by state from 2000-2019 are from the National Center for Health Statistics. Annual measures of electoral democracy by state from 2000-2018 are from the State Democracy Index (SDI). Our analyses predicted states’ death rates from their SDI, controlling for annual measures of states’ political party control, safety net policy generosity, union coverage, and the size of immigrant population, as well as stable differences between states.

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