Conventional wisdom holds that democracy endures in rich countries but is unstable in poor ones. Building on Ansell and Samuels (2014), we suggest that the sources of democratic stability lie not just with a country’s level of wealth, but with its distribution. However, we conceive of inequality and its impact differently from work that focuses on the median voter’s demand for redistribution. In our view, democracy’s survival depends on contestation between competing economic elites, not between a unified elite and the relatively poor median voter. This leads to novel implications: Rural inequality is associated with democratic collapse, but income inequality is not. Results support our theoretical approach and reveal that democracies with low or high income inequality are likely to survive—as long as the landed elite is weak. Wealthier countries are less likely to break down—not because there is less pressure for redistribution, but because different patterns of rural inequality are associated with different levels of development.

David Samuels is Distinguished McKnight Professor of Political Science at the University of Minnesota. He received his PhD from UCSD in 1998. He currently serves as coeditor of Comparative Political Studies. His most recent book, Inequality and Democratization: An Elite-Competition Approach, won the American Political Science Association’s Woodrow Wilson Foundation Award for “best book on politics, government, or international affairs,” as well as the William H. Riker best book prize from the Political Economy Section of the American Political Science Association (website).