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Dimensions of State Capacity and Modes of Democratic Breakdown

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Abstract

State weakness is often emphasized as a key determinant of democratic breakdowns. However, previous studies have failed to appreciate how different aspects of state weakness pose different challenges. Against this backdrop, we examine the relationships between two fundamental dimensions of state capacity (coercive capacity and administrative capacity) and different modes of democratic breakdown, i.e., incumbent-driven and nonincumbent driven takeovers. We propose that coercive capacity mainly enables containment of rebels and coup-plotters, which reduces the risk of nonincumbent takeovers. Conversely, we expect that administrative capacity mainly serves to prevent executive aggrandizement, which reduces the risk of incumbent takeovers. Global analyses of democratic breakdowns between 1789 and 2020 support only the second expectation. Coercive capacity, reflected by territorial control and military personnel per capita, usually drops below accepted significance levels for both modes of democratic breakdown. In contrast, indicators of meritocracy, impartial public administration, and predictable enforcement that proxy administrative capacity show a significant, negative relationship with the risk of democratic breakdown, but only for incumbent-driven takeovers.

Introduction

Several recent cases of democratic backsliding have renewed scholarly interest in the factors that preserve popular rule (see, e.g., Waldner and Lust 2018; Berman 2021). Besides social and economic factors, researchers have considered the institutional underpinnings of democracy, including features of the state (see Cornell and Lapuente 2014; Boese et al. 2021; Andersen and Doucette 2022). However, these studies have not examined how state capacity relates to different modes of democratic breakdown, and the few systematic studies that have distinguished between different modes of democratic breakdown have not assessed the impact of different dimensions of state capacity (see Maeda 2010; Svulik 2015). Against this backdrop, we offer a theoretical framework and an empirical assessment of how different dimensions of state capacity influence different modes of democratic breakdown.

Recent regime developments in Venezuela exemplify why our disaggregated treatment of both state capacity and democratic breakdown is relevant. The demise of Venezuelan democracy over the last two decades under Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro can be linked to a story of state weakness. The country's two-party democratic regime was known for its stability from the 1960s, based on a spoils system through which the labor party of *Acción Democrática* and the right-wing party of *Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente* each used control over the state apparatus and income from the booming oil economy to allocate jobs and resources in return for votes.

Underlying political stability, the spoils system also purged the state apparatus of human capital and remained a source of polarization between the constituencies of the two parties (Cornell and Lapuente 2014: 1292-1295). This had two consequences. When price instability started dominating oil markets in the 1970s, the clientelist state administration proved unable to respond diligently. Being the blunt instrument of political parties that mostly cared for their own electoral success, the administration applied fiscal and monetary

policies inconsistently and continued the corruption and patronage that kept state expenditures high, thereby triggering a major inflation and economic crisis in the 1980s (Buxton 2001: Ch. 2). General hardships and public anger over these practices created a populist upsurge among the electorate, eventually fostering the election of Hugo Chávez for president in 1998. In this way, the state administration indirectly enabled Venezuela's gradual slide into autocracy (McCoy and Myers 2008: 7). Moreover, when Chávez and Maduro assaulted democracy, the weak institutionalization of bureaucratic autonomy in the state administration played into their hands by enabling the placement of loyal supporters in key state offices, thereby stripping the system of its checks and balances and providing uncontrolled access to the state's repressive forces (Muno and Briceno 2021).

The Venezuelan trajectory illustrates three dynamics that have hitherto been under-appreciated in comparative studies. First, some democratic breakdowns are initiated by government agents, whereas others such as military coups differ fundamentally as they are initiated by forces outside the government. Second, the role of state clientelism in Venezuela suggests that low administrative capacity may be key to incumbent-driven breakdowns as it tends to strengthen the electoral platform of would-be-authoritarians and does not provide much in terms of safeguards against incumbent assaults on democracy. Third, coercive state capacity may protect against violent overthrows of democratically elected governments, for which 'paper pushers' in the state administration might be of little help. However, the ability to uphold order and territorial does not help much against threats from within the government. Indeed, in Venezuela, the military and police were left hamstrung and partly acquiescing because the politicization of civil administration had already solidified Chávez's and Maduro's control of the executive.

Our theoretical framework integrates these dynamics. We understand democratic breakdowns as two-stage processes in which opposition or government forces are,

first, motivated to attack democracy and, second, explore the opportunities to succeed in such an attack. In these two stages, we specify the variegated relationships between two dimensions of state capacity – coercive capacity and administrative capacity – and two modes of democratic breakdown, which are driven by incumbents and nonincumbents, respectively.

We derive two expectations. Coercive capacity, understood as the state’s ability to enforce authority throughout its territory, and administrative capacity, understood as the state’s ability to implement policies effectively and impartially, should each affect both stages and decrease the likelihood of both incumbent and nonincumbent breakdowns. However, we also argue that, on balance, we should find important differences. The most pronounced effect of coercive capacity should concern the ability to contain attempted military coups or popular rebellions and thus a reduced likelihood of nonincumbent breakdowns. By contrast, administrative capacity should mainly reduce the likelihood of incumbent breakdowns by weakening would-be-authoritarians’ electoral platform and their opportunities to carry out executive aggrandizement once in power.

To accommodate the challenging task of disentangling the state-regime nexus, we make use of a minimalist understanding of democracy and rely on multiple indicators of state capacity. The data on different dimensions of state capacity from V-Dem and COW (Coppedge et al. 2022a; National Material Capabilities, v.6.0) and data on different types of democratic breakdowns from LIED (Skaaning et al. 2015; Skaaning 2021a) enable us to cover virtually all relevant polities from 1789 to 2020. The comprehensive coverage across the modern period means that the risk of sample bias is reduced, statistical power is increased, and relatively demanding country-fixed effects models can be used even though democratic breakdowns are relatively rare events.

Our findings show that indicators of territorial control and military personnel per capita, reflecting coercive capacity, usually drop below accepted significance levels for

both modes of democratic breakdown when country-fixed effects are introduced. In contrast, indicators of meritocracy, impartial public administration, and predictable enforcement that proxy administrative capacity remain significant predictors with effects ranging from five to ten years ahead of breakdown, but only for incumbent-driven takeovers. Supplementary analyses demonstrate that the significant relationship applies to both subtypes of incumbent-driven breakdowns, i.e., overt takeovers in the form of self-coups, where electoral institutions are put on hold, and the more frequent variant of covert takeovers where electoral institutions are formally uninterrupted, but the competitiveness of elections is nevertheless undermined to a point, where there is no longer a priori uncertainty about the outcome.

Our findings are in line with recent studies showing that administrative capacity ensures a robust democracy whereas coercive capacity is not a clear stabilizer of democratic regimes (see, e.g., Andersen and Doucette 2022; Hicken et al. 2022). Yet, they add important nuance by pinpointing that a high level of administrative capacity does not offer protection against *all* threats facing democracies. It primarily safeguards against threats coming from incumbents, which is – however – a prevalent mode of democratic breakdown, both historically and today.

State of the art

Democracy researchers have begun to study the different modes of democratic breakdown and their different determinants (e.g., Maeda 2010; Svobik 2015). Recent cases of democratic backsliding have inspired new theory and empirical analysis of incumbent takeovers, underlining the individual actions of would-be-authoritarians (e.g., Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018) and the social dynamics among voters that make them succeed in elections (e.g., Svobik 2013; Inglehart and Norris 2017). However, there has only been limited attention to state institutions (e.g., Maeda 2010: 1139; Svobik 2015: 733; see also reviews by Waldner

and Lust 2018; Berman 2021). This is unfortunate since recent research suggests that states' institutional characteristics and performance condition the electoral appeal of would-be-authoritarians and the success of their assaults on democracy (e.g., Andersen and Krishnarajan 2019; Boese et al. 2021). Notably, studies suggest that administrative capacity, including 'bureaucratic quality,' has generally been associated with democratic stability, whereas coercive capacity has not yielded any significant impact (e.g., Andersen and Doucette 2022; Hicken et al. 2022).

The distinction between coercive and administrative capacity runs like a red thread in the state-democracy literature. Partly inspired by Mann's (1984) concepts of despotic and infrastructural power, the argument is that enforcing political will by brute force is qualitatively different from implementing policies in a uniform and rigorous manner, which requires other kinds of resources. Historically, the sources and distribution of these dimensions of state capacity are markedly different across countries (Tilly 1992; Ansell and Lindvall 2021; Hanson and Sigman 2021).

However, instead of focusing on different state functions implied in Mann's concepts, putting coercive and administrative capacity to the center of attention is particularly fruitful in democratization research because they focus on states' ability and performance, which cut across functions. In addition, rather than contingencies determined by political manipulation (e.g., Bauer et al. 2021), coercive and administrative capacity are structural-institutional characteristics that are conceptually distinct from political regime traits (Mazucca 2010). Finally, we use the term 'administrative capacity' to capture the effectiveness as well as the (bureaucratic) quality regarding policy formulation and implementation.

Our primary contribution is to couple them with different modes of democratic breakdown, theoretically as well as empirically. None of the existing state-democracy studies

distinguish between different modes of democratic breakdown. They either treat all democratic breakdowns as uniform phenomena or they investigate changes in degree of democraticness along a full, continuous autocracy-democracy scale.

Although the breakdown-survival dichotomy is analytically useful in many respects, it hides important variation in the driving forces of democratic breakdowns and how these processes unfold. Insofar as there are differences regarding the main actors involved and the processes through which they occur, we surmise that different modes of breakdown are also likely to have different causes. Using one broad breakdown-category means that we risk ending up with biased conclusions regarding the relationship with the two dimensions of state capacity.

Theory

Dimensions of state capacity

The modern state tends to fulfill certain functions, notably extraction, enforcing public order, and delivering public goods (Hanson and Sigman 2021). Accordingly, across time and space, states have employed different kinds of personnel (e.g., military, police, civil administrators) in different types of organizations (Fukuyama 2004). Our point is that to fulfill these functions, state agents possess varying degrees of coercive and administrative capacity.

There are several features related to both coercive and administrative capacity, but we focus on some that are captured by cross-national indicators with comprehensive coverage and that are theoretically relevant for the risk of democratic breakdown while avoiding tautological reasoning. We therefore think of state capacity in relatively minimalist terms, where we exclude the judiciary, which is situated in-between the state and regime arenas and is often treated as a distinct entity in the literature (see Staton et al. 2022). Public

service institutions and agencies, such as hospitals, schools, and daycare centers, are also excluded, as they expectedly are less directly related to democratic breakdown.

Coercive capacity describes the state's ability to enforce authority throughout its territory. It mostly expresses itself in violent and repressive ways by which the military and police uphold public order and ultimately the state's monopoly on violence. In developed states, enforcement is mostly a non-violent and administrative business (Ansell and Lindvall 2021). However, even developed states occasionally use brute force to control populations, such as through policing and imprisonment (Tilly 2007).

Administrative capacity is the state's ability to formulate and implement policies effectively and impartially. Weber famously identified a list of features that characterize bureaucratic as opposed to patrimonial states. Previous research has indicated that merit-based employment is by far the most important indicator of bureaucracy and administrative capacity more generally for influencing important outcomes like equal treatment of citizens and possibly economic development, whereas other Weberian features like employment tenure have clear downsides (Dahlström and Lapuente 2017; but see Cornell et al. 2020; Dahlström and Lapuente 2022). Hence, we focus on meritocratic recruitment norms as one expression of administrative capacity.

While public officials recruited on merits are more likely to act effectively and impartially in their conduct, there is no automatic transfer from organizational features to state behavior. Public administration research, for instance, documents how public official behavior is a product of the complex interaction between private interests, incentives to cater to the wishes of political masters and organizational goals, and the following of professional norms that cannot easily be predicted by formal governance models (Brehm and Gates 1997).

Mapping the behavior of state officials is therefore paramount. One of the most influential attempts was Brehm and Gates' (1997) distinction between working, shirking, and

sabotage as characterizing the general menu of action. However, while working, shirking, and sabotage are tied to specific tasks that states handle, the overarching norms distinguishing ‘good’ from ‘bad’ behavior in the analysis of democratic stability are more likely to concern effectiveness and impartiality, i.e., the propensity to treat equal cases alike (Rothstein and Teorell 2008; Andersen and Krishnarajan 2019). Impartiality and effectiveness cut across policy areas by describing how civil servants plan policy-making processes, give substantive advice, mediate between competing interests, and implement various policies.

Extractive capacity is sometimes considered as an additional, independent dimension of state capacity (see Hanson and Sigman 2021). However, in our view, the extraction of resources to fund state activities is conceptually related to both coercive and administrative capacity because the ability to tax the population requires an administrative apparatus that can organize the extraction (who should pay what, when, and how) on the one hand and control of the territory and an ultimate threat of coercion to back the extraction on the other (Besley and Persson 2009). We therefore understand extractive capacity as a second-order concept that overlaps partially with both of our main dimensions.

Modes of democratic breakdown

Besides excluding the qualities of the judiciary from our understanding of state capacity, we also exclude the rule of law from our definition of democracy to reduce the risk of making near-tautological arguments. Accordingly, we employ a minimalist definition of democracy as a political regime, where access to political power is determined by regular, free elections characterized by uncertainty about the outcome (see Przeworski et al. 2000). Following Maeda (2010) and Svobik (2015), we distinguish between breakdowns driven by the incumbent government and those driven by nonincumbents, i.e., any domestic actor outside the elected government, such as a monarch, the military, or an opposition party or movement.

Democratic breakdowns caused by foreign occupation are excluded from our framework as they are very few and affected by fundamentally different dynamics.

Propositions

The existence of democracy is typically modelled as a function of demand and supply of the principles of democracy and the goods a democracy is expected to deliver (see, e.g., Waldner and Lust 2018; Berman 2021). To understand the causes of democratic breakdown, however, we need to think in terms of a process. Inspired by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018: 6-7) and Boese et al. (2021), our theoretical framework therefore distinguishes between two stages. Demand and supply factors may come in play in both stages but distinguishing between these factors is not our primary concern.

The first stage concerns the conditions that motivate oppositional or military forces to take up arms or use illegal means to remove a democratically elected government, or, alternatively, the conditions that create popular support for ‘would-be authoritarians.’ Here, we find factors that determine whether countries are at risk of breakdown or entering a backsliding process. The second stage concerns the conditions that enable or undermine oppositional or military forces or elected autocrats from accomplishing their undemocratic projects – in short, the risk that an attempted attack on democracy succeeds.

In the following, we consider, for each stage, arguments relating coercive and administrative capacity to the two modes of democratic breakdown. We begin with the relationship between coercive capacity and incumbent-driven breakdowns. In the first stage, weak coercive capacity contributes to public disorder, which spurs a feeling of insecurity and dissatisfaction among citizens. Thus, failure to deliver public order not only increases grievances but should also weaken the incumbent’s claim to rule and the general legitimacy of the regime (Tilly 2007). This situation would provide fertile ground for a would-be-

authoritarian, who campaigns on the willingness to dispense democratic rights and use draconian measures to reestablish order. For example, the inability of security forces to hinder fighting in the streets between communists and Nazis in early-1930s' Weimar Germany radicalized the electorate and increased support for a strongman.

On the other hand, cases where would-be-authoritarians are elected solely on a promise of public order provision are relatively rare. Of all dimensions of performance, the economy is typically more salient for voters – a task more directly tied to the civil administration rather than security forces (Norris 2011: 207). Therefore, the connection between coercive capacity and the election of would-be-authoritarians portending incumbent-driven breakdowns is expectedly less strong.

In the second stage, coercive capacity is arguably of little use for containing incumbent assaults on democracy that usually make use of legal-institutional channels or covert means like bribes and threats, which may be forceful but are nonetheless peaceful. Coercive capacity is important in case the incumbent needs to be arrested, but the repressive repertoire and intelligence services of the security forces have traditionally and even today been designed to handle threats other than the incumbent and his or her party, i.e., from abroad, in civil society, or in the military itself (Herman 2001; Tilly 2007).

Weak coercive capacity should be more strongly related to democratic breakdowns initiated by nonincumbents. Research on social movements and civil conflicts have demonstrated how the absence or weakness of state security forces in registration, monitoring, penetration, and policing provides opportunities for anti-democratic or secessionist forces to mobilize and organize or incentivizes mutinying officers to replace the elected government for martial law (Tilly 2007; Sobek 2010). Consider, for instance, Mali's democratic breakdown in 2012 in which the ill-equipped military failed to control the country's northern regions and fueled the Tuareg Rebellion, which then motivated a group of

soldiers to oust President Touré and suspend the constitution. The recent military coups in the Sahel region tend to represent similar dynamics.

The inability to hinder anti-systemic activity in the first stage obviously hinders the ability to contain an attempted assault by those forces in the second stage. Notable examples of the stabilizing consequences of coercive capacity are found in the interwar period when security forces proved essential in implementing anti-extremist legislation that not only undermined the general strength of anti-democratic opposition but also led to the arrest of coup plotters (Loewenstein 1937; Capoccia 2005).

In sum, because security is a relatively less salient public concern, and because the security apparatus is less suited to address civilian threats, the effect of coercive capacity on incumbent-driven breakdowns is expectedly less pronounced. By contrast, coercive capacity should have strong and clear negative effects on both the motivation and opportunities of nonincumbents for toppling democracy. We therefore propose (H1) that higher levels of coercive capacity decrease the likelihood of nonincumbent breakdowns more than the likelihood of incumbent breakdowns.

Moving on to administrative capacity, we first anticipate that given their similar impact on democratic breakdown, we treat meritocracy understood as an institution and its behavioral implications of effectiveness and impartiality together in a single proposition. Regarding nonincumbent breakdowns, low administrative capacity is often said to strengthen the formation of coup coalitions and anti-systemic movements in the first stage (e.g., Fjelde and de Soysa 2009), as patrimonial administrations have less competence in delivering public services like health care and education and managing economic crises diligently and higher propensity to be politicized by the government in discriminating the opposition (Cornell and Lapuente 2014; Lapuente and Rothstein 2014; Andersen and Krishnarajan 2019). However, although extreme or recurrent malperformance and discrimination may force the opposition

to turn anti-systemic, democracies allow grievances to be aired in peaceful demonstrations or by electoral institutions (Bartusevicius and Skaaning 2018). In this way, the problem with low administrative capacity less often concerns the mobilization of nonincumbent forces.

In the second stage, administrative capacity is also relatively ineffective at containing a nongovernmental threat that has already built up and is situated on democracy's doorsteps. Because popular rebellions or military coups involve the (credible) use of violence, bureaucrats, who work by civil-administrative rather than physical means, have less to say. They must either flee or remain as bystanders.

Administrative capacity is arguably a more powerful deterrent against incumbent-driven threats. In the first stage, poor performance and the opposition-incumbent polarization and zero-sum politics that follow patrimonial administrations primarily improve conditions for authoritarian demagogues to win an election on an anti-government or populist platform (Svolik 2013; Berman 2021: 78). Take, for instance, the democratic breakdown in Belarus in 1994. Administrative chaos and corruption characterized governance in the first years after communism, but in the few years before 1994 violent societal resistance did not build. Rather, it was Lukashenko's successful bid for the presidency on a powerful anti-corruption campaign that sealed the fate of democracy (Beichelt 2004). Conversely, an autonomous bureaucracy with greater records of impartiality in policymaking and implementation makes political compromises more likely because it hinders the incumbent from reneging on side payments to the opposition and thus also strengthens the incumbent's belief that his or her own interests will not be completely sidelined in case government power shifts (Lindvall 2019: 62-66).

In the second stage, at least two mechanisms connect low administrative capacity with a successful incumbent takeover. First, if there is already a proven record of politicized hirings to the administration and clientelistic access to state resources, which is

typical of patrimonial states, party elites tend to see politics as a winner-takes-it-all game. When government is settled after elections, opposition members are therefore more likely to switch or pledge loyalty to the incumbent party or president to maximize their own access to state patronage. This means that the legislative opposition effectively loses seats and thus the ability to turn down anti-democratic constitutional amendments or other proposals that empower the executive, such as it has happened in Russia under Putin (Remington 2008).

Second, in a more direct way, a patrimonial administration enables executive aggrandizement because civil servants handpicked by the government more likely fail to contain executive aggrandizement, such as election manipulation or illegal constitutional amendments. Even bureaucrats recruited on merits may serve undemocratic incumbents, but this is unlikely when fundamental democratic institutions are clearly at stake because such institutions are normally enshrined in the constitution and thus part of the civil service norm of following the rule of law (van Ham and Garnett 2019; Boese et al. 2021).

A couple of recent examples illustrate this point. Due to the weakness of meritocratic norms in post-1983, Erdogan's AKP managed to place partisan loyalists in key state offices. This move has paved the way for further strengthening the appeal of AKP, undermining media freedom, and effectuating opposition party bans, thereby contributing to the decisively unfair elections in 2018 (Somer 2019: 49). In the contentious 2020 US Presidential election, by contrast, the well-institutionalized election administration, run by impartial and decentralized agencies, made sure that President Trump's charges of election fraud eventually appeared unrealistic even to many key Republican figures, and made a clear case for judges to reject Trump's proposal (Jacobs and Choate 2022).

In sum, because democracies allow grievances to be expressed at the polls instead of through violence, and because the civil administration is less suited to address violent threats, the effect of administrative capacity on nonincumbent breakdowns is

expectedly less pronounced. By contrast, administrative capacity should have strong and clear negative effects on both the motivation and opportunities of incumbents for unraveling democracy. Against this backdrop, we propose that (H2) high levels of administrative capacity decrease the likelihood of incumbent breakdowns more than the likelihood of nonincumbent breakdowns.

Research design and data

To assess our hypotheses, we draw on information from up to 126 countries across the world that have – at some point between 1789 and 2020 – been regarded as minimally democratic. Our most extensive specifications thus include almost 5,800 democratic country-year observations. We run a series of regressions on these observations with incumbent and nonincumbent democratic breakdowns as separate dependent variables and different measures of state capacity as well as several relevant controls as covariates.

We use the updated version (v6.3) of the Lexical Index of Electoral Democracy (LIED) to identify democratic country-years, which are to be included in our sample, and (different types of) democratic breakdowns. Specifically, we here operationalize democracy in a minimalist fashion by using LIED's dichotomous competitive elections indicator. For a country-year to be considered democratic, and thus be coded 1 on this indicator, the control over legislative and executive offices are determined by competitive elections, meaning that elections are multi-party, regular, on track, and free so that their outcomes are uncertain. Country-years where at least one of these criteria is missing are scored 0 and thus regarded as autocratic and left out of our sample (apart from the breakdown years, identified by the same source).

Using this minimalist measure is motivated primarily by the notion that genuinely competitive elections is the key feature separating democracies from autocracies

(see, e.g., Przeworski et al. 2000; Svobik 2015). It also mitigates the risks of conceptual overlap with the state and tautological reasoning (e.g., Gjerløy et al. 2021; Andersen and Doucette 2022). In addition, the thin LIED measure contrasts other popular democracy measures (e.g., Boix, Miller, and Rosato 2013) by not considering suffrage, which helps us capture relevant historical variation in the 19th century when few competitive electoral systems passed common thresholds for suffrage.

LIED distinguishes between modes of democratic breakdown that clearly identify the main perpetrator (Skaaning 2021b). These are: (1) covert regression induced by incumbents, (2) military coup, (3) foreign occupation, (4) self-coup (incumbents close parliament unduly and take full political control), (5) coup or civil conflict headed by opposition party/movement, and (6) coup headed by monarch. Capturing incumbent takeovers, we code modes (1) and (4) as 1, and all other observations as 0. The corresponding dummy variable capturing nonincumbent breakdowns is coded 1 for years with democratic breakdown modes (2), (5), and (6), and 0 for all other observations. As indicated above, we will not consider foreign occupations. Note that our categories are basically identical to what Maeda (2012) terms “endogenous termination” and “exogenous termination”, respectively. While there are several disagreements regarding the identification of democratic breakdowns (Maeda’s identification of democratic breakdowns is based on Polity scores), the classification of breakdown modes is identical across all 26 overlapping cases. In total, we cover 136 democratic breakdowns in our most extensive sample (Model 6, Table 1, 6,471 country-year observations), of which 68 are nonincumbent breakdowns and 58 are incumbent breakdowns (the remaining 10 are foreign occupations).

To measure coercive capacity and administrative capacity, we primarily draw on measures that are included in recent versions of the V-Dem dataset (v.12; Coppedge et al. 2022a). These measures have extensive coverage, covering 202 polities and with the longest

time series extending from 1789 to the present (although results are fairly robust when restricting the time series to post-1945), and they relate closely to the concepts of interest. All indicators are coded by V-Dem country experts, and country-year scores are provided on a latent, interval scale after expert-coder scores have been aggregated by V-Dem's IRT measurement model (see Pemstein et al. 2020). We have normalized all state capacity variables that were not already on a 0-1 scale, so that the empirical minimum is 0 and the empirical maximum is 1.

For coercive capacity, we seek out measures of territorial control, which is closely related to the resources a state can muster but relatively distinct from the more organizational and behavioral aspects associated with administrative capacity. We therefore choose V-Dem's indicator "State authority over territory" (*Over what percentage (%) of the territory does the state have effective control?*). We also show analyses using an alternative proxy with more limited coverage, namely military personnel per capita, drawing on data from the Correlates of War project (National Material Capabilities, v.6.0; Singer et al. 1972). This indicator has been used in previous studies to capture coercive capacity based on the assumption that the potential for internal security (including territorial control) increases with stronger armed forces (Haber and Menaldo 2012: 153-154). However, one caveat with this measure – beyond it being a proxy that is only indirectly related to coercive capacity -- is that it might correlate with other characteristics that could influence democratic breakdown, such as external or domestic threat environments.

Concerning administrative capacity, we choose V-Dem's indicator "Criteria for appointment decisions in the state administration." The underlying question asks expert coders "*To what extent are appointment decisions in the state administration based on personal or political connections or alternatively based on skills and merit?*". This neatly captures the degree of meritocracy. In addition, we use V-Dem's Rigorous and impartial

public administration indicator based on the question “*Are public officials rigorous and impartial in the performance of their duties?*” The question neatly captures the behavioral implications of administrative capacity. As an alternative, behavioral indicator, we investigate V-Dem’s Public Sector Corruption Index. It focuses on bureaucratic behavior (public sector bribery and public sector embezzlement) and does not include corruption in other arenas, such as the legislature, executive, or judiciary. As a final alternative, we display results for the V-Dem indicator Transparent laws with predictable enforcement. It captures the degree to which laws are enforced in a predictable manner by the public authorities. We refer to the V-Dem codebook (Coppedge et al. 2022b: 178, 191-193, 301) for details on clarifications and categories for the different questions, and to Appendix A for descriptive statistics.¹

To see what happens when the two dimensions of state capacity are not separated from each other, we also employ the comprehensive index State Capacity index from Hanson and Sigman (2021). It is constructed as a latent variable from 21 indicators of coercive, extractive, as well as administrative capacity through Bayesian latent variable analysis. Since this composite measure captures both of our analytical dimensions, we expect it to show non-robust relationships with both modes of democratic breakdown.

The different state capacity measures are positively related, but the pairwise (Pearson’s r) correlation coefficients are typically modest, with the clear majority being between .3 and .6. If we exempt correlations with Hanson and Sigman’s aggregated index, the most sizeable correlation coefficient between the specific measures (.80) is between two administrative capacity measures, impartial administration and predictable enforcement (see also Appendix A), and the second-highest is between impartial administration and public sector corruption (-.67).

¹ The appendix is made available upon request to the authors.

We also checked the correlation between the measures used in our analyses and alternative measures, all of which have shorter time-series: the Monopoly on the means of violence indicator from the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) and the Regulatory quality, Government effectiveness, and Control of corruption indices from the World Governance Indicators (WGI). As expected, the BTI indicator shows the highest correlation (0.78) with our “Territorial control” proxy for coercive capacity, but far less so with the Military personnel proxy, which is very weakly correlated with any alternative measure. Also as expected, the WGI indicators show the highest correlation with our proxies for administrative capacity (0.74-0.88). Hence, the results support that coercive and administrative capacity capture two distinct, empirical dimensions and that our proxies reflect these dimensions.

As benchmark, we run Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions with county-year as unit of analysis. Errors are clustered by country to mitigate issues of panel-specific autocorrelation. We do, however, assess robustness to different estimators (logit specifications) and error correction methods (see Appendices B-D). The dummy variables for different types of democratic breakdown that are used as dependent variables are measured in year t , and the sample is restricted to observations that are coded as democratic in year $t-1$.

Concerning controls, we include Ln GDP per capita (from Fariss et al. 2022) to account for potential confounding stemming from higher income levels probably leading to greater state capacity as well as lower risk of democratic breakdown. Likewise, we control for negative GDP per capita growth in any of the two prior years, as shorter-term economic crises may also induce both a decrease in state capacity and an increased probability of democratic breakdown. However, since different state institutional features may not only be affected by, but potentially affect, growth and long-term development (Cornell et al. 2020),

we also run additional tests excluding these controls with the aim of reducing potential post-treatment bias (see Appendices B-D).

Furthermore, sensitivity analyses on democratic breakdown have identified few robust covariates (Gassebner et al. 2013). But two such determinants pertain, first, to the length of the democratic regime spell (longer-lived and ‘more consolidated’ democracies have lower risks of breaking down also in the next year) and, second, to democratic breakdowns in neighboring countries or countries in the wider geographic region. Since a longer and more stable regime may also better allow for uninterrupted state-building and since political turmoil in the region could also influence the different dimensions of state capacity, we control for the current length (number of years) of the democratic spell,² as well as the share of democracies that broke down in the region in the preceding years. All covariates are measured in year $t-1$, except for democratic breakdown share in the geographic region (based on the six-fold regional classification contained in V-Dem), which takes the average share of democracies breaking down across $t-3$ to $t-1$, and economic crisis, which is a dummy coded 1 if there was negative GDP per capita growth in $t-2$ or $t-1$.

To account for global trends in democratic breakdown modes, and the fact that the trend has been far from linear across modern history (see, e.g., Bermeo 2016), all specifications include year, year squared, and year cubed. At the risk of reducing degrees of freedom and overfitting our models (given the limited number of democratic breakdowns in any given year), we also test specifications with year-fixed effects in Appendices B-D to account for more complex time trends. Finally, the risk of democratic breakdown may be related to a host of unobserved factors at the country-level that are fairly time invariant, such

² We use a log-transformed version ($\ln[\text{democratic spell}+1]$) for our benchmark, assuming there are decreasing marginal effects from democratic longevity on future survival probability, but our main results are fairly similar when using a linear specification.

as particular geographic characteristics, slow-moving cultural traits, and particular political histories. Thus, our benchmark specifications include country-fixed effects. Alternative specifications with geographic region- instead of country-fixed effects are in Appendices B-D. In these appendices, we also showcase specifications aiming to further mitigate omitted variable bias by adding extra controls, including population size, urbanization, natural resources income, civil society participation, and party institutionalization.

We measure all covariates, including the state capacity measures, in $t-1$. In the absence of good instruments and with a dichotomous outcome variable, this is one of few suitable solutions to reduce reverse causality influencing results (although lagging variables does not preclude reverse causality). When interpreting our coefficients, we should keep in mind that causality probably runs in both directions, as suggested by extant theories (Mazucca and Munck 2014) and comparative-historical analyses (e.g., Mazucca and Munck 2021). To substantiate possible reciprocity, we run regressions measuring the state capacity variables in intervals up to 15 years before and after, respectively, incumbent and nonincumbent breakdowns.

Results

In this section, we first present results for regressions where all democratic breakdowns are counted as 1 for the outcome variable. Next, we present results where the outcome variable only counts breakdowns due to, respectively, nonincumbent and incumbent breakdowns.

Table 1 displays the benchmark results for the democratic breakdown dummy, with Model 1 including the State Capacity index from Hanson and Sigman (2021). Models 2 and 3 substitute this composite measure with more specific measures capturing different aspects of coercive capacity, namely the Territorial control variable from V-Dem and the Military

personnel per capita from COW. Models 4-7 instead use the four discussed measures of administrative capacity.

Table 1: OLS regressions with democratic breakdown (all types) as outcome

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	b/(t)	b/(t)	b/(t)	b/(t)	b/(t)	b/(t)	b/(t)
State Capacity index	-0.015 (-1.130)						
Territorial control		-0.088+ (-1.670)					
Military personnel p.c.			-0.344* (-2.517)				
Meritocratic administration				-0.096* (-2.607)			
Public sector corruption					0.068 (1.537)		
Impartial administration						-0.132** (-3.069)	
Predictable enforcement							-0.144** (-3.604)
Ln GDP p.c.	-0.018 (-0.693)	-0.018 (-1.584)	-0.026+ (1.859)	-0.013 (-1.189)	-0.015 (-1.354)	-0.014 (-1.302)	-0.012 (-1.114)
Economic Crisis	0.002 (0.372)	0.007 (1.505)	0.010+ (1.778)	0.007+ (1.675)	0.007 (1.641)	0.006 (1.405)	0.006 (1.410)
Regional breakdown share	-0.002 (-0.032)	0.096* (2.049)	0.135* (2.537)	0.096* (2.058)	0.092+ (1.971)	0.080+ (1.760)	0.087+ (1.877)
Ln democratic spell length	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Cubic time trend	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Country-fixed effects	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
N	3665	6321	5295	6237	6436	6471	6471
Countries	118	130	126	128	130	130	130
Max. time series	56	227	197	227	227	227	227
R ²	0.027	0.021	0.028	0.020	0.021	0.023	0.023

Notes: Notes: ** p<.01; * p<.05; + p<.1. Regressions with county-year as unit of analysis, restricted to observations coded as democratic in year t-1. Dummy for democratic breakdown in year t is dependent variable. Errors are clustered by country in all specifications. All covariates are measured in year t-1, except for breakdown share region which takes the average share of democracies breaking down across years t-3 to t-1, and economic crisis, which is a dummy coded 1 if there was negative GDP p.c. growth in year t-2 or t-1. All state capacity measures are normalized to range between 0 and 1 to facilitate comparison. Negative coefficient indicates reduced risk of democratic breakdown.

First, we note that Model 1 in Table 1 indicates that the aggregated state capacity measure is not clearly linked to democratic breakdown. The negatively signed coefficient indicates that higher state capacity corresponds to lower probability of democratic breakdown, overall, but the t-value is only -1.1. The results for the coercive capacity

measures indicate that higher coercive capacity mitigates democratic breakdown risk. Yet, only the results for military personnel per capita are statistically significant at the conventional 5% level, whereas the territorial control coefficient only has a t-value of -1.7.

Three of the four administrative capacity measures are negative, sizeable, and significant at least at the 5% level. The coefficient for meritocratic recruitment and promotion procedures for the civil administration is clearly estimated with a t-value of -2.6. The point estimate is also substantial. While point estimates from linear probability models should be taken with a grain of salt, we can assume that a one standard deviation increase (.14) in this measure reduces the probability of democratic breakdown in the following year by about 1.3 percent. (In comparison, 2.1 percent of the observations in our sample experienced a democratic breakdown.) Transparent laws and Impartial administration are both significant at the 1% level. A one standard deviation increase in the latter measure (.17) is predicted by Model 6 to reduce the probability of breakdown by 2.3 percent. Despite these clear results, the link between administrative capacity and democratic breakdown is not entirely robust to choice of measure. Public sector corruption, in Model 5, is insignificant at conventional levels, despite having the expected positive sign (more corruption yields higher probability of breakdown).

Results are very similar when we replicate Table 1 but omit the handful of democratic breakdowns that are due to foreign interventions (see Appendix Table A-3). More generally, these results are generally similar (but occasionally somewhat stronger, e.g., for the overall state capacity measure) when considering different specification choices. We refer to Appendix B for these alternative specifications, including some estimated by logit and several using alternative control strategies. Results are also quite similar when time series are limited to after 1945.

Taken together, there is no clear evidence that coercive capacity matters for democratic survival, but there is evidence – albeit not entirely robust to the choice of measure – that higher administrative capacity prolongs the lifespans of democracies. However, this finding may be due to the aggregation across different modes of democratic breakdown. Table 2 therefore replicates the seven models presented in Table 1, but with the outcome variable now only counting democratic breakdowns that are due to nonincumbent takeovers, of which military coup is the most frequent type.

Table 2: OLS regressions with democratic breakdown related to nonincumbent takeover as outcome

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	b/(t)	b/(t)	b/(t)	b/(t)	b/(t)	b/(t)	b/(t)
State Capacity index	-0.001 (-0.110)						
Territorial control		-0.030 (-0.953)					
Military personnel p.c.			-0.110 (-1.197)				
Meritocratic administration				-0.030 (-1.292)			
Public sector corruption					0.015 (0.413)		
Impartial administration						-0.020 (-0.754)	
Predictable enforcement							0.001 (0.047)
Ln GDP p.c.	-0.011 (-0.446)	-0.010 (-0.910)	-0.014 (-1.094)	-0.007 (-0.709)	-0.008 (-0.857)	-0.008 (-0.861)	-0.009 (-0.894)
Economic Crisis	0.010* (2.226)	0.006+ (1.915)	0.007+ (1.852)	0.007** (2.618)	0.006* (2.025)	0.006* (2.002)	0.006* (2.056)
Regional breakdown share	0.029 (0.616)	0.044 (1.296)	0.058 (1.510)	0.045 (1.321)	0.041 (1.186)	0.039 (1.145)	0.041 (1.199)
Ln democratic spell length	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Cubic time trend	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Country-fixed effects	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
N	3636	6253	5241	6172	6369	6403	6403
Countries	118	130	126	128	130	130	130
Max. time series	56	227	197	227	227	227	227
R ²	0.023	0.014	0.016	0.013	0.013	0.013	0.013

Notes: Notes: ** p<.01; * p<.05; + p<.1. Regressions with county-year as unit of analysis, restricted to observations that are coded as democratic in year t-1. Dummy for democratic breakdown induced by nonincumbent actor in year t is dependent variable. These breakdowns include military coups (2), coups headed by opposition parties or movements (5) and coups by monarchs (6), as coded in LIED v.6.3. For other specification details, we refer to note for Table 1.

For all the state capacity measures, capturing different dimensions, we find that their coefficients are substantially small in size and none are significant even at the 10% level. The most sizeable t-value is only -1.3 (for meritocratic administration). Although these results vary somewhat with the model specification (see Appendix C), there is thus no clear evidence from Table 2 that state capacity in any sense reduces the chances of a democracy-ending coup conducted by nonincumbent actors.

Table 3: OLS regressions with democratic breakdown related to incumbent takeover as outcome

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	b/(t)	b/(t)	b/(t)	b/(t)	b/(t)	b/(t)	b/(t)
State Capacity index	-0.015+ (-1.718)						
Territorial control		-0.022 (-0.884)					
Military personnel p.c.			-0.140 (-1.513)				
Meritocratic administration				-0.060* (-2.103)			
Public sector corruption					0.054 (1.638)		
Impartial administration						-0.107** (-2.905)	
Predictable enforcement							-0.127** (-4.288)
Ln GDP p.c.	-0.008 (-0.788)	-0.003 (-0.575)	-0.006 (-0.856)	-0.002 (-0.321)	-0.002 (-0.349)	-0.002 (-0.307)	0.000 (0.018)
Economic Crisis	-0.008+ (-1.891)	-0.003 (-0.794)	-0.002 (-0.426)	-0.003 (-1.142)	-0.002 (-0.676)	-0.003 (-1.012)	-0.003 (-1.045)
Regional breakdown share	-0.030 (-0.502)	0.024 (0.794)	0.042 (1.174)	0.023 (0.761)	0.023 (0.787)	0.014 (0.491)	0.018 (0.624)
Ln democratic spell length	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Cubic time trend	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Country-fixed effects	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
N	3621	6243	5223	6166	6358	6393	6393
Countries	118	130	126	128	130	130	130
Max. time series	56	227	197	227	227	227	227
R ²	0.011	0.005	0.005	0.006	0.006	0.010	0.011

Notes: Notes: ** p<.01; * p<.05; + p<.1. Regressions with county-year as unit of analysis, restricted to observations that are coded as democratic in year t-1. Dummy for democratic breakdown induced by incumbent in year t is dependent variable. These breakdowns include gradual regression induced by incumbents (1) and self-coup (4), as coded in LIED v.6.3. For other specification details, we refer to note for Table 1.

In contrast, there is evidence that one dimension – administrative capacity – matters for democratic breakdowns induced by incumbent leaders. Table 3 displays the relevant regressions on this alternative dependent variable, once again replicating our benchmark specification and testing the seven different measures of state capacity. While the Public corruption measure just misses the 10% significance threshold ($p=.104$), the Meritocratic administration measure is significant at the 5% level and Transparent laws and Impartial administration measures at the 1% level. As shown in Appendix D, these results also hold up well or are further strengthened (for example if we use logit instead of OLS, substitute the country dummies with region dummies) in alternative specifications. Results are particularly robust for the Transparent laws and Impartial administration measures, even in demanding specifications substituting the cubic time trend with year fixed effects or when expanding the benchmark with additional potential confounders such as urbanization, population, natural resource income, civil society participation, and party institutionalization.

Overall, there is thus support for our expectation that greater administrative capacity helps shield democracies against incumbent leaders that may want to concentrate power in their own hands and transform the regime into an autocracy – whether as a self-coup or in a covert takeover. In other words, meritocratically recruited officers or civil servants, who act in an impartial manner, protect democracy from power-hungry elected leaders aiming to consolidate power at the expense of the democratic system. When combined with the consistent null-results from Table 2, this is evidence in support of our Hypothesis 2 stating that high levels of administrative capacity decrease the likelihood of incumbent takeovers but not the likelihood of nonincumbent takeovers.

However, we do not find that the measures tapping into coercive capacity help shield democracy against such threats. While negative, Territorial control ($t = -0.9$) in Table 3, Model 2, is far from significant at conventional levels. Indeed, this measure is not close to

significance even in alternative specifications where we substitute the country-fixed effects with region fixed effects. Similar results for alternative proxies of coercive capacity point in the same direction (see Appendix D). While marginally stronger, also the Military personnel measure in Model 3 ($t = -1.5$) is insignificant at conventional levels and remains so in several alternative specifications displayed in Appendix D. Hence, higher coercive capacity does not seem to mitigate the threat to democracy posed by elected incumbents.

Our theoretical framework and findings do not preclude that democracy might have an impact on state capacity. Indeed, some final robustness checks indicate that the relationship might go in both directions. Figures A-1 to A-7 in the Appendix show that meritocratic administration and impartiality are associated with a lower risk of democratic breakdown when lagged up to five years. Yet, they also show a significant relationship with democratic breakdowns when they are measured up to five years ahead, indicating that democratic breakdowns tend to undermine administrative capacity. Similar signs of reciprocity can be identified for incumbent breakdowns as well: up to ten years lagged effect for impartiality (Figures A-15 to A-21), but not for the nonincumbent breakdowns (Figures A-8 to A-14). There is thus reason to believe that meritocracy and impartiality on the one side and democracy on the other are mutually reinforcing. This preliminary finding calls for further theoretical elaboration and empirical appraisal of how regime type influences coercive capacity and administrative capacity.

Conclusions

We have provided a statistical analysis of regime transitions with global coverage from 1789 to 2020, which systematically disaggregates both sides of the state-democracy equation by examining the relationships between coercive capacity, administrative capacity, and two modes of democratic breakdown. Our findings align with recent analyses (e.g., Andersen and Doucette 2022; Hicken et al. 2022) that emphasize the importance of administrative capacity

rather than coercive capacity for democratic stability. Hence, our findings also support the notion that not all aspects of state capacity are equally important for democratic survival, while also rejecting that state capacity should be deemed generally irrelevant. Administrative capacity – reflected in meritocratic organizations characterized by impartial and rule-following behavior – tends to stabilize democracy whenever that regime has been installed.

Yet, our findings challenge previous assumptions by demonstrating that administrative capacity only constitutes shields against particular authoritarian forces, namely those coming from elected incumbents. However impartial or meritocratic the state administration is, it is of less help when democracy faces military coup plotters, a popular rebellion, or other more open challenges from outside the inner circles of government. Moreover, coercive capacity, in contrast to strong assumptions in the literature (e.g., Tilly 2007), also yields no significant effect on such nonincumbent takeovers.

In the bigger picture, the missing impact of state capacity on nonincumbent takeovers is worrisome because nonincumbent takeovers, although more prevalent in the decades before the third wave of democratization, have never ceased to exist, as illustrated by recent coups in Myanmar, Mali, and Niger. It suggests that we cannot just rely on a strong state when facing coup-plotters and rebels. Still, it is also notable how investments in administrative capacity seem to be effective in containing future attempts of executive aggrandizement. Rather than just a matter of structural conditions or actor contingencies, incumbent democratic breakdowns are (also) driven by medium-term state-institutional dynamics. In fact, some of the most infamous examples of democratic backsliding in recent decades dovetail these results and suggest that democracy researchers and policy makers alike should take seriously how different legacies of state patrimonialism negatively affect democratic durability.

With our findings in mind, it is easy to find reasons for being pessimistic regarding the future of democracy. Bloated and clientelist state administrations were at the heart of the crises that contributed to the electoral victories of and subsequent successful assault on democracy by Fujimori in Peru (1990), Lukashenko in Belarus (1994), Putin in Russia (2000), and Chávez in Venezuela (1998) (see Levitsky 1999; Beichelt 2004; Sakwa 2004: 18-19; Savchenko 2009: 173, 179; Muno and Briceno 2021). These trends of incumbent takeovers seem to be continuing in recent cases, such as Hungary and Turkey. Even here, where the level of socioeconomic development was even initially relatively high and democracy said to have already consolidated, would-be-authoritarians could win by making corruption and recurring modes of patrimonial governance major targets of electoral campaigns as well as the means to carry through their plans after elections (Kuru 2012; Hajnal and Boda 2021: 81).

Nevertheless, we also find notable examples of democratic survival by means of administrative capacity in cases like Czech Republic under Babis and the US under Trump. The latter case is particularly illustrative of the influence of administrative capacity. On the one hand, today's polarization and disrespect of democratic norms are partly results of old institutions of partisan replacement of administrative staff in connection to executive turnovers. This has occasionally exhausted federal resources, deepened mistrust in the state, and thus paved the way for Trump (Fukuyama 2014; Jacobs et al. 2019). On the other hand, we saw democratic shields being put up by exactly those state organs that were staffed based on meritocratic criteria and, accordingly, were able to derail Trump's attempts at stealing the 2020-election. While these examples are encouraging, the prevalence of patrimonialism and fragility of meritocratic systems around the world constitute continuous risks that should not be ignored.

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