

Which Aspects of State Capacity Matter for Democratic Survival?

Key Takeaways

- High administrative capacity is more important for safeguarding democratic regimes than high coercive capacity of states.
- High administrative capacity is especially important for mitigating threats to democracy coming from elected incumbent leaders, but less important for mitigating risks of military coups.
- To strengthen democratic resilience, policy makers should build and invest in maintaining a rule-following and non-corrupt public administration that recruits and promotes bureaucrats based on principles of merit.

State Institutions at the Forefront of Democratic Resilience

Over the last fifteen years, the political regimes of many countries across the world have shifted in a less democratic direction. In some cases, these shifts have been so pronounced that countries previously considered democracies have turned into autocracies; they have experienced a “democratic breakdown.”

Unlike in the 1960s or 70s, most democracies that have broken down in recent years have not done so due to military coups or other types of coups conducted by actors outside the government. Instead, the primary driving force has been incumbent government members, often with the current president or prime minister spearheading the change. Such breakdowns of democracy are most often preceded by a stepwise process characterised by the gradual erosion of democratic institutions, while the government maintains the façade of a functioning democracy (Bermeo 2016; Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018).

In other words, today’s democratic breakdowns are usually led by incumbents who gradually weaken democratic institutions and opposition forces, often through legal channels, to consolidate their grip on power – a process also known as executive aggrandisement.

However, many – indeed most – democracies have not experienced such democratic breakdowns. Some democracies are also able to stop and reverse processes of democratic decline before they turn into autocracies. Which factors explain why some democracies are more resilient to the threats posed by executive aggrandisement than others?

Part of the answer may lay in the nature of the country’s state institutions, i.e., the formal structures and organisations through which a state carries out its functions, such as enforcing security and providing public services. More specifically, state capacity is one of the key institutional characteristics that scholars examine to understand how democratic institutions withstand or succumb to autocratic threats.

A growing body of research has found that administrative state capacity, in particular, can help stabilise democracies (e.g., Andersen & Doucette 2022), and that indicators of such capacity are among the most robust explanatory factors of democratic resilience or durability (Coppedge et al. 2022; Rød et al. 2019).

STATE CAPACITY

State capacity can be defined as the state’s power to achieve intended outcomes (Andersen et al. 2025; Lindvall & Teorell 2016). It thus refers to the way institutional structures are used by executive and legislative parts of the state apparatus to implement policies and provide public goods. We can distinguish between administrative and coercive state capacity (Andersen et al. 2025).

Administrative capacity includes meritocratic recruitment, impartial policy implementation and predictable law enforcement. It is therefore close to the concept of bureaucratic quality (Andersen & Doucette 2022). **Coercive capacity** refers to the state’s ability to maintain territorial control and deploy military resources effectively.

However, important questions remain concerning how particular aspects of state capacity shape democratic resilience towards different types of threats, such as military coups and incumbent-led efforts to change the political system from within.

In a recent article, Andersen, Knutsen and Skaaning (2025) draw on disaggregated data from V-Dem (Coppedge et al. 2022a) and the LIED dataset (Skaaning et al. 2015) to assess these questions. They find that administrative state capacity, in particular, can reduce the risk of democratic breakdown, and especially incumbent-led democratic breakdown.

In this brief, we will consider the concept of state capacity, how it can be measured, and present results from Andersen et al. (2025) on its relationship with democratic breakdown or survival. We conclude with several policy implications arising from this study.

Measuring State Capacity

In order to study the importance of state capacity for democratic survival, one must find a way to measure it. However, operationalising state capacity so that the measure fully captures the underlying concept is challenging, as state capacity entails several distinct aspects. Andersen, Knutsen and Skaaning (2025) distinguish between administrative and coercive capacity and rely primarily on V-Dem indicators to measure several aspects of these two dimensions of state capacity, as illustrated in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1. STATE CAPACITY SUB-CATEGORIES

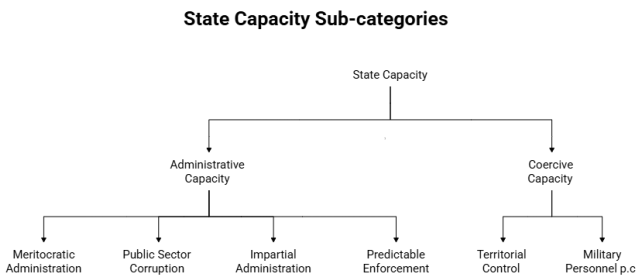


Figure 1: Dimensions of state capacity and relevant indicators used by Andersen et al. (2025)

To capture administrative state capacity, Andersen et al. (2025) use several indicators relating to distinct aspects of the public administrations, such as recruitment, impartiality, and the presence or absence of corruption. The V-Dem indicator “Criteria for appointment decisions in the state administration” measures to what extent recruitment is based on personal or political connections versus on skills and merit (Coppedge et al. 2022b, 192). Two other indicators, also drawn from the V-Dem dataset, focus on bureaucratic behaviour: The “Rigorous and impartial public administration” indicator relates to how bureaucrats perform their duties, whereas the “Public sector corruption index” measures bribery and embezzlement in public administrations (Coppedge et al. 2022b, 178, 301). Conversely, the “Transparent laws with predictable enforcement” indicator measures whether the body of laws is communicated clearly, and is coherent, stable and enforced in a predictable manner (Coppedge et al. 2022b, 178).

To capture coercive state capacity, Andersen et al. (2025) use V-Dem’s “State authority over territory” indicator, which measures the percentage of the territory over which the state has effective control. They also use a measure of military personnel per capita from the Correlates of War project (Singer et al. 1972).

The Links Between State Capacity and Different Types of Democratic Breakdown¹

The importance of state capacity for the survival of democracies has been researched and discussed by many political scientists before (e.g., Andersen et al. 2014; Hicken et al. 2022). However, Andersen et al. (2025) argue that distinguishing between different aspects of state capacity as well as various forms of democratic breakdown may improve our understanding and ability to explain the relationship.

More specifically, the authors find that high administrative state capacity, in particular, can successfully fend off incumbent-led attempts

to dismantle democratic institutions. Where administrative capacity is low, incumbents have a better chance of succeeding in expanding their powers at the expense of the democratic system. These findings, which are based on a global analysis with time series extending back to the French Revolution of 1789, are statistically significant and robust across various specifications.

Coercive capacity, on the other hand, is unlikely to play an important role in fending off executive aggrandisement, as the security apparatus of a state is less suited to address institutional threats “from within.” This expectation is backed up by Andersen et al.’s statistical findings.

Conversely, administrative capacity may not protect against overthrows of sitting governments from actors outside government, such as military officers plotting a coup. Indeed, the results from Andersen et al. (2025) indicate that administrative capacity does not safeguard democracies from nonincumbent-led breakdowns. However, neither does coercive capacity according to their statistical analysis. While it could be expected that coercive capacity in the form of strong state control over the territory and a strong military could help to fend off coups by nonincumbents, the results of this study do not provide evidence for such a link.

Policy Implications

In the context of increasingly frequent attacks on democratic institutions from within the system, the link between administrative state capacity and the prevention of democratic breakdown is highly important. Andersen et al.’s (2025) findings show that the Weberian ideals of an impartial and meritocratic bureaucracy are valuable not only for organising a functioning state, but also as guardrails for democratic systems.

The insight that high administrative capacity, as indicated by meritocratic recruitment to the bureaucracy, impartiality, and predictable enforcement of laws, can protect against incumbent-led democratic breakdowns has several implications for policymakers seeking to strengthen democratic resilience.

First, state bureaucracies should prioritise meritocratic hiring. While political appointments are common, especially at the top levels of bureaucratic structures, research shows that merit-based hiring contributes more to building stable and resilient democratic administrations.

Second, state bureaucracies should be impartial, treating equal cases alike. This relates to how civil servants formulate and implement policy, provide advice, and consider the interests of various groups. To achieve this, policymakers must provide the conditions and legal frameworks that enable civil servants to work independently and free from political interference.

Third, transparency and predictable law enforcement are essential. State institutions must communicate laws clearly and implement them reliably. This establishes clear boundaries for unlawful behaviour. As a result, civil servants will understand their mandate, how to exercise it, and how to protect their institutions in case of future attempts at executive aggrandisement.

1. This section refers exclusively to the results from Andersen, Knutsen and Skaaning (2025), unless specified otherwise.

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