

Coalitions of Regime Supporters and Regime Survival

Key Takeaways

- Regimes with numerically larger support coalitions survive significantly longer.
- Coalition diversity further increases regime durability.
- Narrow coalitions heighten vulnerability to elite defection and coups.
- These patterns hold for different types of regimes and draw on data extending from 1789 to the present.

Regime Supporters and Regime Durability

Why do some political regimes endure decades while others collapse quickly? Previous research has addressed several explanatory factors related to the structure of the economy, a country's political history, or even the current institutional make-up of the regime. For example, researchers have argued that the presence or absence of elections may influence the longevity of autocratic regimes (Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009) and that the choice between presidentialism versus parliamentarism shape the longevity of democratic regimes (Linz, 1990).

Other researchers have highlighted that different characteristics of the coalitions of actors supporting the regime – such as whether it is large or small, homogeneous or diverse – can shape political stability and the regime's resilience (e.g., Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003; Horowitz, 2000; Huntington, 1968; Lijphart, 1999).

In this Policy Brief, we review the findings of a recent paper (Knutsen, et al. 2025a) which details and tests theories on how the nature of the regime's support coalition – i.e., the group of actors that support the current regime and helps retain it in power – affects regime durability. In particular, the authors argue that not only the size but also the diversity of the support coalition matters for regime survival.

Regime Support Groups and Regime Support Coalitions

A **regime support group** is defined as “a group of individuals who are supportive of the existing regime, and, if it were to retract support would substantially increase the chance that the regime would lose power” (Coppedge et al 2022, 135). Both the provision of support for the regime and that this support should substantially influence the regime's hold on power are individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for a group to constitute a regime support group (Knutsen et al. 2025b). This definition, according to Knutsen et al. (2025a), extends beyond narrow elites to include wider societal groups, which core decision makers in some way rely on or represent, even though the groups themselves have no direct involvement in policy-making processes.

Regime support coalitions are defined as the set of all regime support groups.

Measuring Regime Support Groups and Coalitions Using V-Dem Methodology

One key challenge to studying the effects of support-coalition characteristics on regime survival has been the absence of valid measures of the former that span across different countries and extensive periods of time. Previous studies have mainly relied on proxy measures based on institutional characteristics rather than more directly measuring the characteristics of support coalition actors as such (see, e.g., the discussions in Knutsen et al., 2025b).

Using the V-Dem infrastructure and methodology, Knutsen et al. (2025b) collected more direct measures of coalition actor characteristics to capture the various characteristics of the social groups that support or oppose the regimes in power, such as their social identity, geographical location, and numerical size. Drawing on global data covering more than 230 years (1789–2020), Knutsen et al. (2025a) then empirically test the relationships between, on the one hand, the size and social group diversity of support coalitions and, on the other, regime survival.

Coalition Size and Diversity as Sources of Stability

Regimes that are supported by larger as well as socially more diverse coalitions survive significantly longer than regimes that rely on small and homogeneous coalitions of supporters. Both size and diversity matters, and they considerably shape the stability of democratic as well as autocratic regimes.

The size of support coalitions might have a stabilizing effect on the regime through different mechanisms. For example, drawing more people into an expanded coalition might also entail weakening opponents which are threatening the regime and their ability to effectively mobilize mass opposition against the regime. Beyond size, coalition diversity also matters. Regimes supported by multiple social groups with different power resources – be they economic, coercive, organizational, or ideological – are better equipped to handle varied threats. This diversity reduces the likelihood that a single shock such as a protest, elite rivalry, or economic downturn will destabilize the regime.

FIGURE 1. PREDICTED PROBABILITY OF REGIME BREAKDOWN

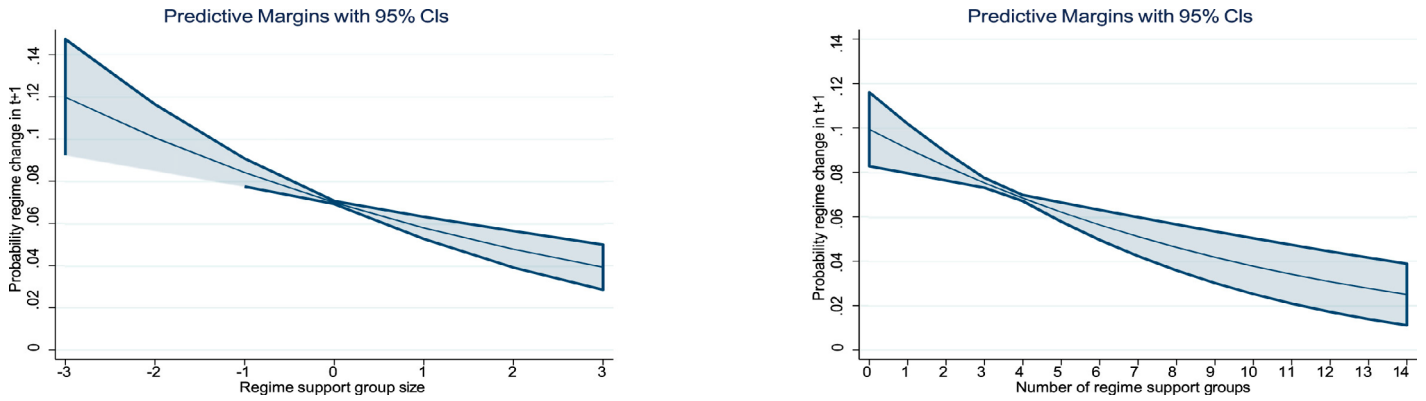


Figure 1: Predicted probability of regime breakdown in the following year, by size of the regime support coalition (left plot) and diversity of the coalition, as measured by the number of social groups in the coalition (right plot). Source: Knutsen et al. (2025a).

It is worth noting that democracies typically have larger and more diverse coalitions than autocratic regimes, and that the findings in Knutsen et al. (2025a) can thus contribute to explaining that democratic regimes are relatively more persistent than autocracies. Yet, it is also worth highlighting that the findings that larger and more diverse coalitions enhance regime durability are robust also when the authors limit the analysis to differences among and within autocracies.

Moreover, the findings reported by Knutsen et al. (2025a) clearly indicate that even when controlling for the number of supporters, regimes with more diverse support coalitions have a substantially lower predicted probability of breakdown in the following year. As indicated by the right plot in Figure 1, this predicted probability falls from about 10 percent in a given year for an (otherwise “average”) regime supported by only one social group to less than 4 percent for regimes with 10 or more social groups in the coalition.

The findings are similar for the relationship between size of coalitions and probability of breakdown when controlling for diversity. In particular, increasing support coalition size seems to reduce the risks of regime breakdown due to popular uprisings, but not regime breakdowns due to military coups or self-coups (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. PREDICTED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN REGIME SUPPORT COALITION SIZE AND DIFFERENT TYPES OF REGIME BREAKDOWN

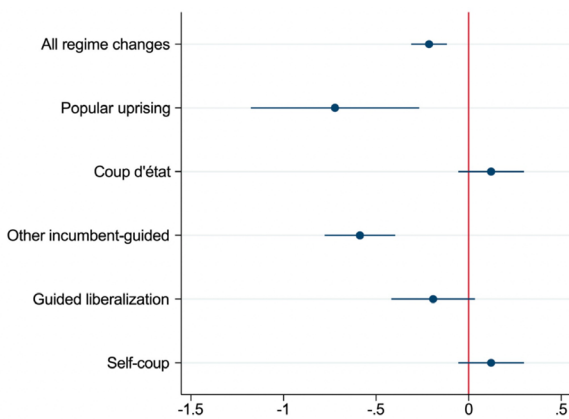


Figure 2: Predicted relationship between regime support coalition size and different types of regime breakdown in the following year. Coefficient estimates (dot) with 95% confidence intervals (bars). Negative coefficients imply that a numerically larger support coalition reduces the chances of a particular type of regime breakdown. Source: Knutsen et al. (2025a).

Conclusion

Both size and diversity of regime support coalitions enhance regime durability. Larger and more diverse coalitions reduce regimes’ reliance of a small set of supporters or dependence on any single segment of society.

When support is spread across multiple social actors, defection by one faction is less likely to trigger immediate regime collapse. Broader coalitions also make it harder for challengers to coordinate unified opposition. In contrast, regimes resting on very small coalitions may appear stable but are inherently fragile. When a key insider group withdraws support, the regime often collapses, for instance through military coups or more controlled processes of elite-driven regime change.

These findings do not mean that building broader and more diverse coalitions is risk- or cost-free. Maintaining loyalty across a large and diverse support coalition could prove expensive. Distributing benefits widely may strain state resources, and internal disagreements can create gridlock.

However, historical evidence shows that, on average, the stabilizing effects are considerable and may outweigh these costs. Regimes with larger and more diverse coalitions survive longer, even when holding constant other relevant factors for explaining regime survival such as the level of economic development or degree of democracy.

Regime stability thus depends heavily on the characteristics of those who support the regime. Broadening the power base to include various urban and rural groups representing different economic sectors or other segments of society could therefore reduce political instability. However, this means that such increased inclusion can also strengthen and prolong authoritarian rule.

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Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) is a unique approach to conceptualization and measurement of democracy. The headquarters – the V-Dem Institute – is based at the University of Gothenburg with 11 staff. The project includes a worldwide team with 5 Principal Investigators, 22 Project Managers, 33 Regional Managers, 134 Country Coordinators, Research Assistants, and more than 4,000 Country Experts. The V-Dem project is one of the largest ever social science research-oriented data collection programs.



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