

Something is Rotten in the Alliance: Democratic Backsliding Reduces Public Support for Aiding Allies

Damian Boldt, *University of Virginia*
Caroline Robbins, *Florida State University*

Global Public Opinion Workshop, Tallahassee, FL

Research Question

How do **regime transitions** and **regime type** affect democratic state's willingness to **uphold their alliances**?

- Alliance quality assessed through **heuristics**
- Regime **type** (autocracy/democracy)
- **Stability** (consistent/transitioning)
- Heuristics assess through two main mechanisms
- Similar values (**compatibility**)
- Commitment volatility (**reliability**)

Hypotheses

H1: A democratic public will be **less** willing to fulfill their alliance obligations when the allied state is an **autocracy**.

H2: A democratic public will be **less** willing to fulfill their alliance obligations when the allied state is **experiencing any transition**.

H3: A democratic public will be **less** willing to fulfill their alliance obligations when the allied state is **experiencing backsliding**.

H4: A democratic public perceives an ally as **less reliable** and **less credible** when they **experience backsliding**.

Data and Methods

In both studies, we provided a hypothetical vignette where a US ally was attacked by a neighboring country. (US population with quotas)

Study 1 (n ~ 1, 605): Factorial

- Varying:
 - (1) Current regime type of the ally
 - (2) Recent regime transition
 - (3) Geographic region
- Measured support for using military force to assist ally

Study 2 (n ~ 2,623): Embedded Natural Experiment

- Varying:
 - (1) Democratic backsliding
 - (2) Length of alliance
 - (3) Geographic region
- Measured support for using military force and military aid, and sanctions against attacking state
- Measured perceptions of reliability and compatibility

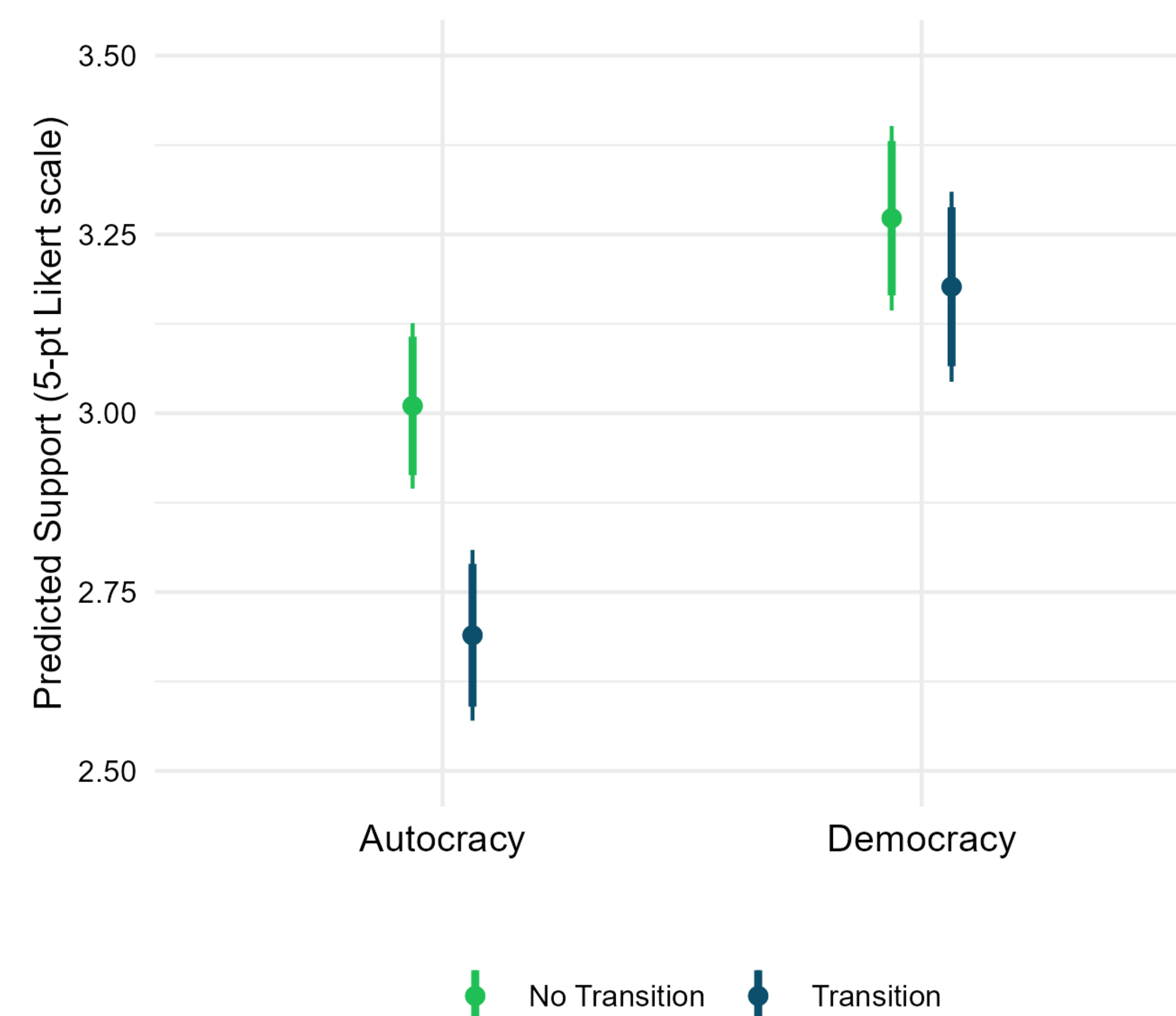
Study 1 Results

Regime Type = decreased support for defending autocratic ally (30% change in standard deviation [p < 0.005])

Transitions = decreased support in defending transitioning ally (15% change in standard deviation [p < 0.005])

Transitions to autocracy uniquely decrease support (45% change in standard deviation [p < 0.001]).

Figure 1: Predicted Support for Using Military Force



Implications of Study 1

Regime transitions are not a black box with a uniform effect – the **type of transition** matters.

- **Transitions to democracy less penalized** by the public
- Heuristic of **autocracy** seems strong

What is driving the difference?

- Are democracies more reliable?
- Distance between values?
- Potential reputation or moral costs?

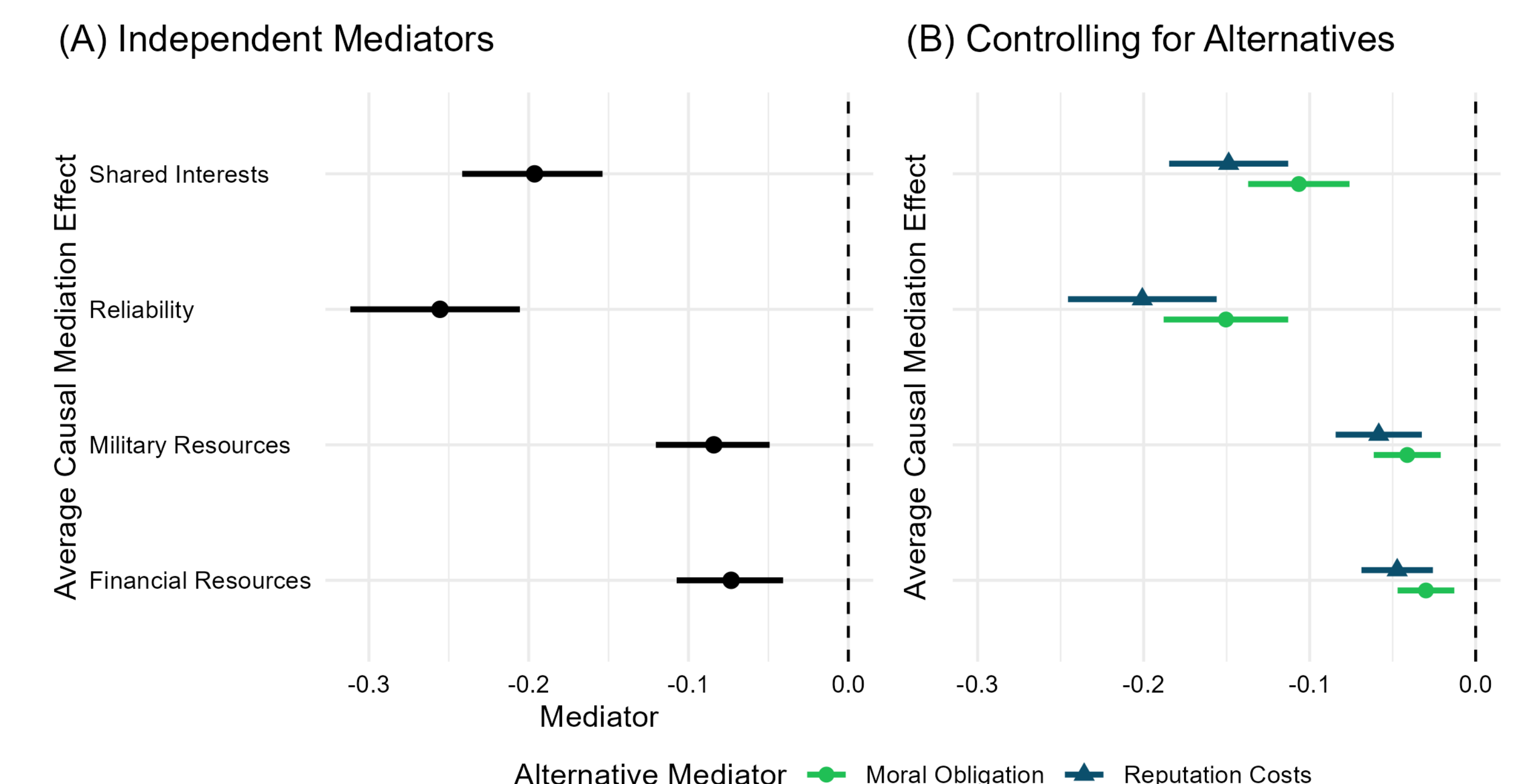
Study 2 Results

Backsliding **decreases** public support for:

- Providing military support (32% change in s.d. [p < 0.001])
- Providing military aid (35% change in s.d. [p < 0.001])
- Enacting sanctions (10% change in s.d. [p < 0.01])

Backsliding also **decreased perceptions** of shared interests and future reliability of the ally. (ACME = 40% change, [p < 0.001])

Figure 2: Mediation Analysis of Reliability and Compatibility



Estimates represent the ACME, with 95% bootstrapped CIs using the quantile approach. (A) treats each mediator as independent. (B) controls for either perceived reputation costs or moral obligation, in turn.

Discussion

If democratic backsliding reduces costs for abrogating alliance agreements, there are severe implications for the stability of existing alliance networks:

- Value of alliance relationships is **conditional**
- **Type** of regime transitions matters
- **Perceived distance** in shared interests or reliability decreases public willingness to support a state

Supplemental
Analyses

