being a contested concept. They suggest that scholars consider both executive removal and executive perpetuation as well as an act's degree of constitutionality. Drew Kinney's contribution focuses on coup advocacy, in which civilians call for a coup attempt. Kinney includes an expanded definition of coups, which includes the January 6 event although he argues that regardless of the label, the attack and its lead-up represent critical instances of coup advocacy. Traditional coup scholarship ignores such instances, potentially overlooking important political events.

Mwita Chacha explores the treatment of coups by an international organization, the African Union (AU). His contribution demonstrates inconsistency in the term's use within a legal framework, specifically regarding various acts falling under the AU's framework for dealing with unconstitutional changes in government. Although the AU has made gains in stigmatizing coups that target incumbents, Chacha argues that the organization selectively uses the coup label while ignoring other elements of the framework. Specifically, the unconstitutional *maintenance* of power, the type of development seen in the United States following the 2020 election, has received little attention despite a rash of efforts aimed at extending one's tenure. Recent coups in Africa (e.g., Niger 2010; Burundi 2015) and elsewhere (e.g., Honduras 2009) have occurred amid such dynamics.

This forum concludes with Erica De Bruin's reflections on the stakes of correctly classifying coups and antidemocratic actions. She offers a way for scholars to productively contribute to the public discourse on such events, highlighting the normative and practical importance of correct labels.

Rethinking Coups, Autogolpes, Illegitimate Impeachments, and Sundry Other Democratic Violations: What's in a Name?[1]

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A new category of public-facing scholarship is booming. Across magazines, blogs, and op-ed pages, experts analyze current events to evaluate public claims that they constitute attempted "coups." Just in *Washington Post*'s *Monkey Cage* and *PostEverything* blogs, political scientists have dissected, and mostly dismissed, "coup" claims regarding the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in Brazil (Perla 2016; Smith 2016), the fall of Evo Morales in Bolivia (Boulding et al. 2019), and both Donald Trump's first impeachment and his attempts to overturn the 2020 US presidential election (Chin, Carter, and Wright 2019; Drezner 2019; De Bruin 2020b; Singh 2021). A Google search locates dozens of blog posts or popular press articles inquiring into "coup" allegations, all bearing titles playing on the line from Romeo and Juliet, "Would a rose by any other name smell as sweet?" Not to cede the field to pundits, the fact-checking website PolitiFact ran a column on "coup" claims in the aftermath of the January 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol but did not answer its own question (Jacobson 2021).

What is going on? Why the public interest in alleging "coups"? What thread ties together the many events citizens and activists call coups? Moreover, what explains

[1] An early version of this essay originally appeared on the *Mischiefs of Faction* blog (Smith 2020). An online appendix is available at ISA Online.

the persistent mismatch between scholarly and popular concepts? Finally, is a more productive line of dialog possible?

To answer those questions, we begin by mapping uses of the term "coup" in public, nonacademic discourse across the Western Hemisphere, relying on Google Trends data. This analysis demonstrates that the term is applied to tremendously varying encroachments on democratic norms and procedures for possession of executive power. Contrasting public and academic vocabulary, in the second section, we argue that the term constitutes an "essentially contested concept" (Gallie 1955; Collier, Hidalgo, and Maciuceanu 2006). Persistent confusion, we argue, indicates that scholars' attempts to impose a precise vocabulary fail to satisfy the ethical objectives, instincts, and (following Gallie) "exemplars" or mental models of citizens and activists, and even scholars themselves. Accusations of "coups" proliferate in part because the word sounds important and egregious and expresses outrage against violations of public sovereignty. Moreover, we argue that these normative and conceptual disagreements have influenced scholars' own use of the concept to a greater extent than often acknowledged.

In light of these "essential contests," we suggest scholars rethink communicative goals and strategies. In the third section, we outline one new academic categorization of violations of executive order that moves beyond the "coup-versus-not-coup" distinction. Specifically, we characterize violations of popular will for executive succession along two dimensions: by whether they remove presidents or perpetuate presidents in power and by whether they use ostensibly constitutional or nonconstitutional means.

Popular Uses of the Term "Coup"

What do citizens mean when they call an event a "coup"? In this section, we explore how the term is used in eighteen Latin American countries and the United States. Our sample includes a wide range of presidential hybrid regimes and low-quality democracies—places particularly likely to be sites of coups. Linguistically, focusing on the Western Hemisphere simplifies the task to three languages, two of which share common vocabulary for coups.

We analyze search data from Google Trends, as Google's monopoly over internet searches yields a reliable measure of public interest in a specific topic. While our analysis parallels that of Marsteintredet and Malamud (2020), we analyze data from general searches, rather than scholarly publications, and we disaggregate our analysis by country. These differences reflect our interest in the use of the term in popular discourse and across contexts, rather than in scholarly communities in particular. The search data are available from 2004 onward in most of the sample but are only consistently available from 2008/2009 onward in Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Paraguay.

Our key variable is Google Trends' interest over time measure of the volume of searches for a specific query—in our case, *golpe de estado* for all Latin American countries (including Brazil) and *coup* for the United States. Google Trends reports search interest on a scale ranging from zero to one hundred, where zero indicates the absence of information. Google Trends rescales the variable to reflect search interest over time, relative to the peak for the specified country/region and period. Therefore, in our analysis each country has a peak of one hundred in one month; other observations are relative to that peak. (See further information in our online Appendix.) In this short essay, we focus only on the most salient peaks in each country. The fact that Google Trends rescales results, rather than presenting the actual frequency of searches, limits our analysis. We can assess the relative frequency of searches over time within each country, but we are unable to compare across countries or make claims about overall interest in coups. However, the availability of data back in time and Google's broad coverage of internet searches reflect the

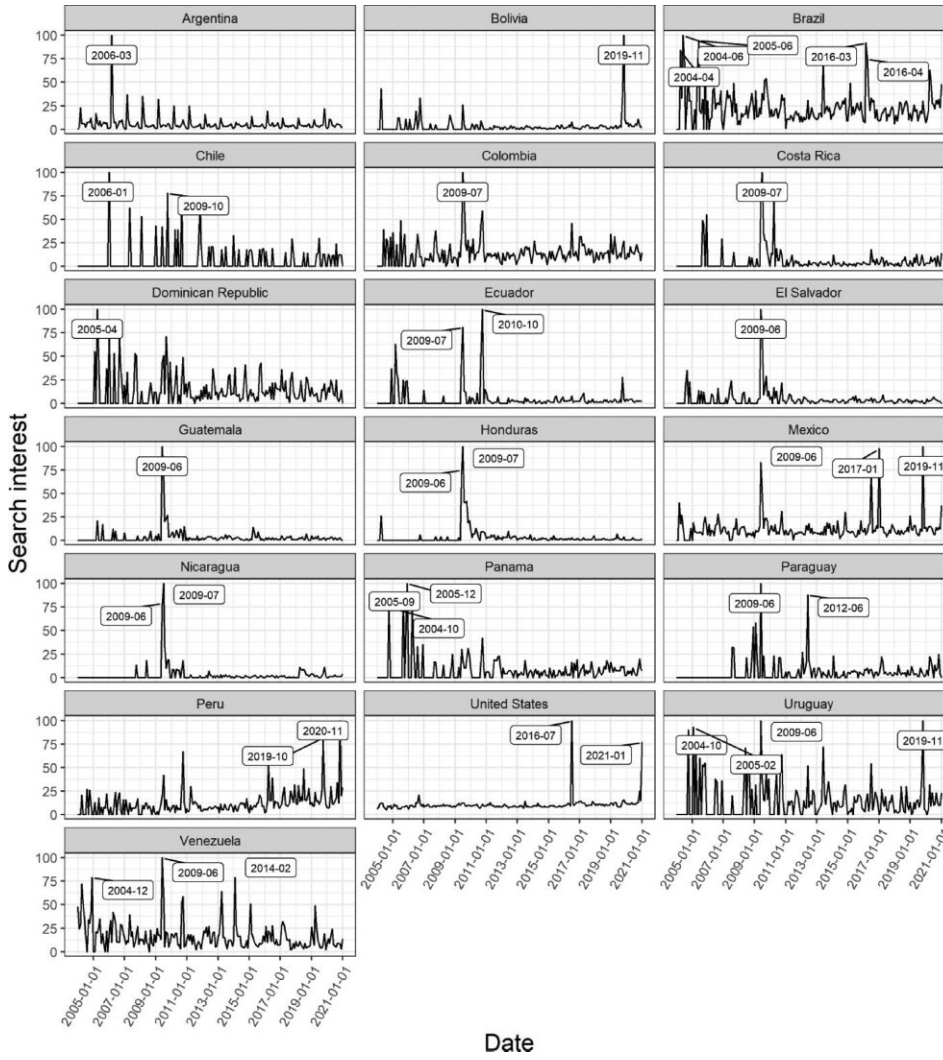

Figure 1. Interest in the terms "coup" and "golpe de estado" over time in Latin America.

interest of citizens from different countries in acquiring information about coups properly, an advantage that overcomes its drawbacks.

Figure 1 depicts substantial variation in interest in the terms *golpe de estado* and *coups*, across countries and time. For instance, Brazilians and Venezuelans seem to have searched for information about coups across the entire period, as exemplified by numerous peaks. By contrast, Argentines, Bolivians, Hondurans, and Americans exhibited little interest in coups over most of the period, besides the few months in which searches for coups peaked. We should note that the search ended on January 11, 2021; our partial data for the month of January almost certainly reduce the height of the second peak in the US trend line.

Table 2 summarizes the most salient events that awakened interest in coups in each respective country. In the online Appendix, we discuss how we identified the specific events of concern. To avoid tautology, we describe the events without making a judgment at present regarding whether they "really" constitute coups.

Table 2. Most frequent uses of "coup" in the Americas since 2004

Country	Date	Event
Argentina	March 2006	Anniversary of 1976 Argentine military coup
Bolivia	April 2004	Protests against natural gas exportation
Bolivia	November 2019	Protests and military intervention against Evo Morales
Brazil	June 2005	Mensalão corruption scandal
Brazil	March 2016	Impeachment of Dilma Rousseff
Chile	January 2006	Election of Michelle Bachelet
Colombia	July 2009	Judicial and military intervention in Honduras
Costa Rica	July 2009	Judicial and military intervention in Honduras
Dominican Republic	April 2005	Unclear
Ecuador	July 2009	Judicial and military intervention in Honduras
Ecuador	October 2010	Police protests and mutiny
El Salvador	June 2009	Judicial and military intervention in Honduras
Guatemala	July 2009	Judicial and military intervention in Honduras
Honduras	July 2009	Judicial and military intervention in Honduras
Mexico	June 2009	Judicial and military intervention in Honduras
Mexico	January 2017	Protests against increases in fuel price
Mexico	November 2019	Protests and military intervention in Bolivia
Nicaragua	July 2009	Judicial and military intervention in Honduras
Paraguay	June 2012	Impeachment of Fernando Lugo
Peru	October 2010	Police protests and mutiny in Ecuador
Peru	October 2019	President Vizcarra dismisses Congress
Peru	November 2020	Vizcarra's removal on grounds of "moral incapacity"
United States	July 2016	Turkish coup attempt
United States	November 2020	Trump's refusal to recognize Biden's victory
United States	January 2021	Invasion of the US Capitol
Uruguay	June 2009	Judicial and military intervention in Honduras
Uruguay	November 2019	Protests and military intervention in Bolivia
Venezuela	June 2009	Protests and military intervention in Honduras
Venezuela	February 2014	Protests and violent state repression

We are primarily interested in the domestic events that trigger searches. However, we note an intriguing finding at the outset: interest in "coups" is an international phenomenon; citizens search for information on other countries. For instance, in June 2009, the Honduran army removed President Manuel Zelaya and sent him into exile in Costa Rica—a decision ratified by the Supreme Court, supposedly on the grounds that Zelaya was attempting to eliminate term limits. As we show in greater detail in the online Appendix, this intervention triggered months of interest in "coups" not only in Honduras but also in Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Paraguay, and Uruguay. Another event that provoked spillovers was the "resignation" of the leftist President Evo Morales in Bolivia in November 2019. Following nationwide street protests against alleged electoral fraud, as well as an army pronouncement "recommending" the president resign, Morales gave up his office and fled to Mexico. On November 11–12, 2019, interest in the term peaked in Uruguay and Mexico, two other countries with left-leaning presidents. A final example of spillover effects is the spike in interest in the United States following the 2016 foiled military coup attempt against Erdogan in Turkey.

Apart from high-profile international events, which domestic events are described as "coups" or "golpes"?[2] We see some references to classic military interventions, including Argentina's 1976 military coup (prominent on its thirtieth anniversary)

[2] Table 2 includes two spikes we cannot explain: one corresponding to the election of Michelle Bachelet in Chile and one with no clear precipitating event in the Dominican Republic in 2005.

and, somewhat more ambiguously, the aforementioned events in Honduras in 2009 and Bolivia in 2019. However, other events not typically characterized in political science scholarship as coups also drive interest in the term, suggesting that ordinary citizens are exposed to discourse referring to them as such. For instance, a number of spikes correspond to cycles of citizen-driven protest that potentially threatened executives' ability to stay in office, including in Bolivia (April 2004), Brazil (June 2013; see online Appendix), Mexico (January 2017), and Venezuela (February 2014). Ecuador's October 2010 police mutiny and protests are somewhat more ambiguous. While police constitute security forces who might in principle unseat a president, scholarship suggests that President Correa, a would-be strongman, exacerbated the crisis but was never in danger of what political scientists would typically call a "coup" (e.g., Cleary and Özturk 2021).

Congressional and judicial threats to executives—even threats following constitutional procedures—are also described as "coups." The Brazilian case is notable. While social unrest in 2013 had awakened some interest in "golpes," the highest spike in Brazil's noisy trend line is in 2005, when the *Mensalão* corruption investigation arguably threatened President Lula's presidency. Interest also peaked during the 2016 impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, removed from office for "fiscal irresponsibility." However, this phenomenon was not limited to Brazil. Paraguay's second highest spike corresponds to the impeachment of President Fernando Lugo, removed from office in June 2012. Despite controversies, Paraguay's Supreme Court and Electoral Court ruled that Lugo's impeachment was constitutional. Similarly, Peruvian President Martin Vizcarra's removal by Congress on the grounds of "moral incapacity" led to Peru's highest spike in searches for the term "coup."

A final category of uses involves executives' attempts to expand their power. One example is Vizcarra's dismissal of the Peruvian Congress in October 2019. Another is Donald Trump's efforts to overturn Joe Biden's victory in the United States: both his refusal to acknowledge Biden's victory (November 2020) and the invasion of the US Capitol two months later. Importantly, the use of the term does not appear to hinge on the constitutionality of the executive's actions. Vizcarra's dismissal of Congress arguably followed the constitutional procedure, given Peru's unusual division of powers (Samuels and Shugart 2010); Trump's refusal to acknowledge Biden's victory was norm-breaking but not unconstitutional. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the most prominent instances of what Bermeo (2016) would call "executive aggrandizement" in the region in recent years are missing, including most of the milestones in Chavismo's gradual takeover of the Venezuelan state.

An Essentially Contested Concept

What unites these uses of the term? The popular concept evidently extends far beyond that Powell and Benhammou espouse in the introduction to this symposium and even beyond the concept's longer historical trajectory. Table 2 includes events that political scientists would call "cycles of protest," "congressional oversight," "impeachments," "mutinies," "executive aggrandizement," and "autogolpes" or "self-coups." An alternative definition emerges from the confusion: it appears that—at least in these self-professed "democracies"—citizens use the term "coup" to refer to any interference with democratic procedures for popular sovereignty in controlling possession of the executive office.

Why would citizens, pundits, and politicians corral all these different beasts within the strictures of the label "coup"? Marsteintredet and Malamud (2020, 1015) argue that the explosion of academic writing on "coups with adjectives" (for instance, compound nouns such as "parliamentary coup") is a form of "prevalence-induced concept change." The decline of "real" or traditional coups (Powell and Thyne 2011), they maintain, has led academics to stretch the concept to incorporate

empirical phenomena more prevalent today. Indeed, as regional multilateral bodies and hegemons such as the United States increasingly sanction coups, domestic instability now more often takes the form of politicized impeachments, presidential resignations under popular duress, and the like (Pérez-Liñán 2007; Hochstetler 2011; Marsteintredet, Llanos, and Nolte 2013). Moreover, most democratic backsliding today happens via mechanisms other than traditional coups (e.g., Bermeo 2016; Cleary and Özturk 2021). Thus, we argue with Marsteintredet and Malamud (2020) that confusion over the term "coup" partially reflects conceptual drift in the currents of history. However, this explanation leaves open the question of why citizens would latch onto the term "coup," in particular.

To explain this appropriation, we propose that "coup" is an "essentially contested concept," following criteria laid out by Gallie (1955) and clarified by Collier, Hidalgo, and Maciuceanu (2006).[3] First, the term is "appraisive," or normatively charged; its valence inverts that of "democracy," which is likewise essentially contested. This negative valence has intensified in recent decades, as multilateral bodies and hegemons such as the United States increasingly sanction interruptions of democratic order (Levitt 2006; Mitchell 2016; Arieff, Lawson, and Chesser 2020). Second, the term is "internally complex," "diversely describable," and subject to "considerable modification in the light of changing circumstances," as exemplified by this symposium as well as the forgoing discussion. Third, the concept is understood with respect to various "exemplars"—prototypical military coups of a kind more common in earlier periods. Finally, both public and academic battles involve what Collier, Hidalgo, and Maciuceanu (2006, 219) term "reciprocal recognition" of conflicting conceptualizations, exemplified in public debates. As an essentially contested concept, the word "coup" is not dissimilar from others such as "art" and "democracy"—normatively charged and endlessly debatable, both among ordinary citizens and scholars.

Putting these traits together, two things become clear. First, both conceptual complexity and the diversity of cultural exemplars of coups make it possible to assemble conflicting arguments about what counts as a coup. Second, under those conditions, citizens and politicians will appropriate the concept precisely because coup allegations constitute normatively charged accusations of major violations of democratic sovereignty. Other academic terms such as "executive aggrandizement" evidently fail to reflect normative outrage. In the contemporary international sphere, coup allegations serve as a call for action—perhaps for security forces to shut down protests or for citizens to rise up against an impeachment. The temptation of conceptual stretching will be particularly strong in a period in which democratic violations are increasingly prevalent. In the end, we academics will be unable to stop the evolution of language.

One final point bears emphasis: academic conceptualizations of "coup" are also less crisp than often acknowledged. Powell and Ben Hammou describe the concept's origins in a seventeenth-century definition akin to what we would today call an "autogolpe" or "executive aggrandizement" (see also Powell and Thyne 2011; Marsteintredet and Malamud 2020). In assembling their master dataset, Powell and Thyne (2011) weeded out numerous instances of autogolpes, revolutions, civil wars, etc., that prior scholars had coded as "coups." Even today, scholars differ on questions such as the need for speed or security force involvement.[4] The definitional requirement of illegality raises further questions, such as whether a coup is still a coup if the Supreme Court declares it constitutional (as in the case of Honduras

[3] Here, we contradict Marsteintredet and Malamud, who declared that "a coup is not an essentially contested concept like democracy or populism," and assert "a relatively broad academic consensus on what constitutes a coup" (Marsteintredet and Malamud 2020, 1021). Looking beyond academic to public discourse, dissensus is evident. Moreover, we argue that the concept's academic trajectory exhibits less consensus than these authors suggest.

[4] For instance, Singh (2021) declared the 2021 assault on the US Capitol "not a coup" because Trump's calls to arms were, he claims, made in his capacity as a private citizen.

Table 3. Forms of attempted interference in democratic sovereignty

	Constitutional hardball	Gray area	Overtly unconstitutional
Executive removal	"Illegitimate" impeachments and destabilizing protest (e.g., removal of Vizcarra, Peru 2020; possibly police protests, Ecuador 2010)	Democratic actors + military (e.g., removal of Morales, Bolivia 2019)	Traditional coups (e.g., Argentine military coup, 1976)
Executive perpetuation	Interference with electoral process (e.g., Trump's attempted pressure on Electoral College, US 2020)	Executive aggrandizement (changing institutional rules) (e.g., Maduro consolidates power, Venezuela 2014–2021; Vizcarra closes Congress, Peru 2019)	Traditional self-coups and overt electoral fraud (e.g., Fujimori, Peru 1992; attempted assault on US Congress, 2021)

2009; see Marsteintredet and Malamud 2020) and whether a coup "counts" if the constitution retains tutelary powers for military intervention in domestic politics. While each disagreement may seem small, the sum leaves wide latitude for citizens, politicians, and academics to argue over whether any given incident constitutes a coup.

Is There a Way Out of the Confusion?

Gallie (1955, 193) argued that scholars who recognize "a given concept as essentially contested" should accept "rival uses of it … as not only … humanly 'likely,' but as of permanent potential critical value to one's own use." We would not go so far as to argue for the "critical value" of conflicts over labeling coups. However, we do maintain that scholars should accept such conflicts as "humanly likely," even inevitable. Citizens and political actors will use language for their own ends. Admitting that they outnumber academics on the linguistic battlefield, we suggest that academics pause to reconsider their goals. If clear communication is the objective, it may be time for a new vocabulary, at least in public writing.

We propose an alternative framework that might organize the dizzyingly varied meanings of this essentially contested concept on two dimensions. First, some interventions remove the executive and others perpetuate the executive in power; this is, for instance, the core distinction between traditional coups and traditional self-coups or autogolpes. Second, interventions fall at different points on a spectrum from ostensibly constitutional to overtly unconstitutional. Here, the notion of "constitutional hardball" (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018) is useful: constitutional procedures can undermine democracy, as when legislators impeach a highly popular president to escape accountability for their own corruption.

Table 3 puts these two dimensions together to categorize different ways that political elites and militaries can block the popular will regarding who holds the presidency. The table includes a middle "gray area" on the second dimension; in the contemporary era, democratic interference is often of ambiguous constitutionality. Standard academic definitions of coups are located at the top right cell. Strikingly, however, table 2 provides examples to populate every cell, implying that democratic legitimacy is uncorrelated with constitutionality.