The Coup: Competition for Office in Authoritarian Regimes

Toke Aidt and Gabriel Leon

The Oxford Handbook of Public Choice, Volume 2
Edited by Roger D. Congleton, Bernard Grofman, and Stefan Voigt

Print Publication Date: Feb 2019 Subject: Political Science, Parties and Bureaucracy
Online Publication Date: Feb 2019 DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190469771.013.15

Abstract and Keywords

Coups, understood as attempts to overthrow the sitting executive government by a group inside the state apparatus that includes part of the military, shape competition for office in authoritarian regimes. They do that both directly through actual coups and indirectly through the threat of a coup, which forces incumbent autocrats to balance loyalty and repression to pre-empt being overthrown. The chapter presents a framework for the study of coups and uses it to examine how coups can help select autocrats and to some extent keep them accountable. It presents a number of stylized facts about coups and summarizes the theoretical and empirical literature on the role of coups in autocracies.

Keywords: coup, dictatorship, autocracy, dictator’s dilemma, political competition

17.1 Introduction

ON June 4, 1979, flight lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings, awaiting execution for his role in a plot to overthrow Ghana’s military government, was freed by mutinous soldiers. By the end of the day, Rawlings had successfully overthrown the Ghanaian government and installed a new military regime. Three weeks later, the deposed leader, General Fred Akuffo, was executed along with many other senior members of his government. A brutal dictator was replaced by a new brutal dictator.

The 1979 coup in Ghana brings into relief a number of facts about coups that most casual observers will find surprising. First, most coups are staged against nondemocracies. The majority have not been instances of CIA-backed right-wing generals overthrowing popular democratically elected left-wing leaders. What results after these coups is generally a dictatorship that often, as in the case of Ghana, is just as violent as the regime it replaced.

In this chapter, we present a framework for the study of coups and use it to examine how coups can help select autocrats and, to some extent, keep them accountable. We define "coups" as an attempt to overthrow the sitting executive government by a group inside the state apparatus that includes the military. A coup is deemed to have been successful if it results in the old executive government and its leader being removed from power for at least seven days.[1] Although many coups are nonviolent, the threat of violence is an important part of every coup.

The literature on coups is extensive and cross-disciplinary, spanning a number of fields including economics, political science, sociology, and history. The approaches taken by different scholars vary widely, as do the findings and conclusions. Our goal in this chapter is not to summarize this literature in its entirety but to formulate a simple public-choice framework that can help us understand which are the important (p. 329) questions, where the challenges lie, and what progress has been made in the past in addressing these questions.

The rest of the chapter is organized as follows. Section 17.2 introduces a framework for understanding coups. Section 17.3 presents some basic statistics and empirical results on the causes and consequences of coups, and reviews some of the evidence on the causes and consequences of coups. In the process of discussing these results, we outline the main econometric challenges faced by this literature. Section 17.4 reviews the classic public-choice literature on coups, and discusses how coups may serve to discipline and select autocrats. Section 17.5 examines the actions a government can take to prevent coups, with a particular focus on the military. Section 17.6 concludes with some suggestions for future research.

17.2 A General Framework for Studying Coups

In his seminal book on coups, Finer (1962) emphasized the distinction between the disposition and opportunity to intervene and overthrow the incumbent government in a coup. This distinction can be formalized using the framework in Leon (2014b). In the status quo, the society is ruled by an incumbent ruler. A challenger may contest his rule and mount a coup. For concreteness, we can think of the challenger as a military officer (denoted S), who must decide whether to stage a coup. His position under the incumbent (denoted I) gives him a payoff V_I that he keeps if he does not stage a coup. If he does stage a coup, he instead receives an expected payoff of:

$$\sigma V_S + (1-\sigma)(V_I - C),$$

where σ is the probability that the coup succeeds, V_S is the value to the officer of taking power, which must be understood as a largely private benefit derived from being able to control the government, and V_I − C is the payoff he receives if the coup fails. The parameter C measures the penalty imposed by the incumbent ruler on the officer if the latter stages a failed coup. From this it follows that the officer will stage a coup only when the

expected value from doing so is greater than the value of doing nothing, which simplifies to:

$$\sigma [V_S - V_I] > (1 - \sigma) C.$$

In words, this says that the expected value from staging a coup, which is equal to the probability of success times the gain from a successful coup, has to outweigh the expected cost of failure. The disposition to attempt a coup is captured in the gain from staging a successful coup $V_S - V_I$. Which factors affect these values and what causes them to vary remain an open research question, but these functions can capture anything (p. 330) from changes in military spending to social or economic policies over which the officer may have some interest. The opportunity to intervene is captured by σ. It measures the officer's ability to stage a successful coup and is influenced by the strategies that the incumbent adopts to make it harder to stage a successful coup. The larger this parameter, the more likely that a coup, if staged, will succeed. Clearly, no coup will be staged if this probability is small, as the expected cost will exceed the expected benefit.

Before proceeding, we want to stress three particular points about this framework. First, it is possible that a factor might play into both the disposition and opportunity to intervene. This will be the case with military spending, for example: more spending on the army may increase the probability that a coup succeeds, but might also enter into the payoffs V_S and V_I. Yet this conceptual difference is still useful in organizing the discussion and in assessing the identification challenges associated with an empirical test of the different theories.

Second, there are instances where it is unclear how a factor may impact on the opportunity or disposition to intervene, and assumptions will have to be made. Military spending again provides a good illustration: it could increase the probability that a coup succeeds, since more spending translates into more equipment and more soldiers. But this need not be the case: if more military spending translates into more soldiers, this might exacerbate the collective-action problem within the military. Whether military spending has a net positive or negative impact on the probability of a successful coup is ultimately an empirical question, but one that, for a number of reasons we discuss, is difficult to address.

Third, the equation presented here does not constitute a complete model, since we have left out the actions of the incumbent dictator. The incumbent dictator will know that coups are possible, and will respond to that threat by trying to impact the opportunity or having the disposition to intervene. A coup is the equilibrium outcome that arises from the optimal choices made by the incumbent autocrat and the military officer in what is typically a repeated game. It is possible that even when coups do not take place, their possibility plays an important role in shaping the incumbent's policy choices. This is an idea that has been pursued by a number of authors. Acemoglu et al. (2010), for example, present a principal–agent model where the military is an agent of the elite, and they show the conditions under which the military may overthrow the elite in a coup and establish a military dictatorship. Besley and Robinson (2010) examine the optimal size of the military,

and show that when the government cannot commit to future actions, it will create a tin-pot military in order to avoid coups. If the government can commit, it can then create a large military and avoid coups by paying soldiers an efficiency wage. Svolik (2013) explores a similar trade-off: the government needs the military to repress the population, and this enables the military to extract concessions.

Finally, Finer (1962)'s characterization is not the only one that is possible. Belkin and Schofer (2003), for example, differentiate between fundamental or structural causes and those that are simply triggers. And much of the literature has focused on a small subset of factors, often dividing them into economic and political causes. (p. 331)

17.3 Empirical Studies of Coups

This section presents some facts about coups and discusses the empirical literature on the causes and consequences of coups.

17.3.1 Stylized Fact About Coups

There are a number of facts about coups that will appear surprising to those who are not familiar with the literature. First, table 17.1 shows that in a cross section of 153 countries, nearly half of them experienced at least one coup in the period 1963–1999.

Table 17.1 Countries with Coups (1963–1999)

(Experienced at least 1 coup in this period)

	Countries	**Percentage**
Yes	74	48%
No	79	52%
Total	153	100%

Notes: The coup data is from Belkin and Schofer (2003).

Table 17.2 reveals that these headline numbers hide a substantial amount of regional and time heterogeneity. In particular, Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America (p. 332) experienced more coups than the rest of the world, but the frequency of coups has gone down over time.

Table 17.2 Average Number of Coups (by country-year)

	Decade			
Region	**1960s**	**1970s**	**1980s**	**1990s**
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.16	0.14	0.08	0.08
Latin America & Caribbean	0.13	0.13	0.06	0.04
Europe & Central Asia	0.01	0.04	0.02	0.02
East Asia & Pacific	0.04	0.07	0.03	0.01
Middle East & North Africa	0.15	0.05	0	0.03
South Asia	0.04	0.13	0.04	0.07
North America	0	0	0	0
All Countries in Data Set	0.10	0.09	0.05	0.04
Observations	780	1,194	1,320	1,466

Notes: The coup data is from Belkin and Schofer (2003). Regions are as defined by the World Bank. Country-years for which there is no coup information are dropped. The 1960s decade only includes the years 1963–1969.

Perhaps more surprising is the fact that coups succeeded roughly half the time (see table 17.3), which goes against the commonly held view that most coups are successful. Naturally there are some measurement problems in observing failed coups, since many may have been stopped before they became public.

Table 17.3 Coup Success and Failure (1963–1999)

	Number	Percentage
Success	117	50.43%
Failure	115	49.57%
Total	232	100%

Notes: The coup data is from Belkin and Schofer (2003). The success and failure information is from Banks (2001), Powell and Thyne (2011), and the New York Times Archive.

Finally, table 17.4 breaks down coups by the type of regime they targeted, whether they succeeded or failed, and the type of regime that followed. It shows that most coups were against nondemocracies, that the success rate did not depend on the type of regime targeted, and that successful coups largely led to nondemocratic regimes.

We now turn our attention to the causes and consequences of coups—that is, the factors that generate the observed stylized facts.

17.3.2 The Causes of Coups

There are a number of challenges in conducting an empirical investigation of coups. First, coups are events that take place at the national level, and so the unit of analysis has to be the country. Second, they are relatively rare events, so that when exploiting within country-time variation, most countries will have experienced no coups while others will have experienced only one or a few. The dependent variable of interest—some measure of a coup—is often difficult to observe. We see all the successful attempts, but there are probably many attempts that fail before they become public, and in many cases the targeted government will have a strong incentive to keep these attempts from becoming public. The reverse can also be true: governments may claim that they have been victims of a coup when in fact they have not. Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez are both famous for (allegedly) fabricating stories about U.S.-sponsored plots against their governments.

There is also the serious issue of reverse causality, in the sense that the expectation that a coup might take place will affect current decisions. This is captured by our framework in the statement that a government will respond to the threat, potentially in an (p. 333) optimal way, and in doing so the threat will be modified. In practice, what we observe is an

equilibrium anti-coup policy and the coup decision, and any empirical study that is looking for a causal relationship will need to take this into account. Belkin and Schofer (2003) capture this idea when they say that neither Syria nor France has experienced a successful coup since 1970, but that one would think that the Syrian government is always taking measures to avoid coups, while the French government is not.[2] They try to address this problem by creating a measure of "coup risk" that focuses on the structural causes of coups, rather than on the triggers; and after a careful examination of candidate variables, they settle on three measures: the strength of civil society, the regime's legitimacy, and past coups.

Table 17.4 Coups and Transitions (1963–1999)

Coup Against: (year before)	**Outcome:**	**New Regime: (year after)**
Democracy 48	Success 26	Democracy 1
		Nondemocracy 24
	Failure 22	Democracy 18
		Nondemocracy 2
Autocracy 185	Success 84	Democracy 7
		Nondemocracy 74
	Failure 87	Democracy 6
		Nondemocracy 80
Successful Coups		
New Regime: (year after)	Democracy	Autocracy
	8	105

Notes: Regime data is missing for some coups. The coup data is from Belkin and Schofer (2003). The success and failure information is from Banks (2001), Powell and Thyne (2011), and the New York Times Archive. The regime data is from Cheibub et al. (2010).

Finally, there are serious problems with omitted variables, in the sense that there are factors that potentially affect both whether coups occur and some of their potential causes. These include the coup leader’s background, the ideology of the officer corps, (p. 334) and

many other variables. This problem is particularly severe given the confidential nature of most military data.

A large number of academic studies into the determinants of coups have been carried out over the years, and more than 66 different potential determinants have been suggested, including economic factors (e.g., GDP per capita, economic crises), political factors (e.g., democracy, protection of property rights, political stability), military factors (e.g., the size of the armed forces, military spending), and historical factors (e.g., coups in the past).

Extreme bounds analysis (EBA) is one way to establish which of these many potential determinants are important and robustly correlated with the probability of a coup. This involves a systematic evaluation of all possible linear probability (regression) models with an indicator of the occurrence of a coup as the dependent variable and a fixed number of potential determinants from the target list of possible determinants as the explanatory variables. Gassebner et al. (2016) present an EBA of this type. They judge a variable to be a robust determinant of coups if 90% of the cumulated density (CDF) associated with the estimated coefficients on the variable of interest (e.g., GDP per capita) across all the models considered is on one side of zero.

The results show that slow economic growth, past coups, and various forms of political violence and instability are robustly correlated with coups. Surprisingly, the level of income (GDP per capita) and democracy do not robustly reduce the risk of a coup. It is also notable that that variables pertaining to the military do not show up as robust. This does not, however, mean that these variables are necessarily irrelevant.

The EBA does not deal with the three problems that we highlighted at the beginning of this section, and does not pretend to do so. It is informative about the nature of the conditional correlations in the data, but to gain insight into causal drivers of coups, it is necessary to isolate appropriate exogenous variation in the relevant determinants. Some recent studies have made progress in that direction.

The seminal study by Londregan and Poole (1990), which considers the impact of economic variables on the probability of a coup, finds, unlike the EBA, that high income per capita reduces the probability of coups.[3] GDP per capita is likely to be affected by many of the same unobserved factors that affect the likelihood of a coup (e.g., economic instability and uncertainty), which could bias Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) estimates downwards. Kim (2016) adopts an instrumental variables strategy to overcome this problem and examines the relationship between exogenous income shocks and coups. He differentiates between transitory and permanent shocks to the economy, and examines the impact of transitory shocks by using rainfall and temperature variation to instrument for income per capita. He finds that short-run weather shocks cause falls in income per capita that significantly increase the probability of a coup.

The military is involved in some way in most coups, and it is, therefore, surprising that Gassebner et al.’s (2016) list of robust determinants of coups does not include a single variable related to the military (such as military spending). One reason could be that the

analysis does not differentiate between the likelihood that a coup will be staged and the probability that it is successful conditional on it being staged. Powell (2012) argues (p. 335) that military spending *reduces* the probability of a coup being staged (in Finer 1962's language, it reduces the disposition to intervene), while it *increases* the probability of success once the coup has been staged. As argued earlier, this in turn would help make the staging more likely. Powell (2012) finds, in contrast to EBA, that military variables appear more important than economic factors.

Another way to gain causal insights into the role played by the military in instigating coups is to ask whether successful coups benefit the army. If they do, then that would give the military a positive reason to stage coups in the first place. To overcome the endogeneity problem inherent in answering this question, Leon (2014a) proposes to focus exclusively on instances where coups have taken place, and then exploits the conditional randomness of the outcome. Naturally, there will be unobserved omitted variables that impact the outcome of a coup, even if conditional on a coup taking place, but this is unlikely to be a serious problem for military spending. The study finds that successful coups result in larger changes in military spending than do failed coups. This suggests that financial rewards are a motivation for staging coups, and this is confirmed by the fact that military spending tends to dip right before coups take place. In a related result, Bove and Nistico (2014) compare the evolution of military spending in 40 countries to a synthetic control, and find that successful coups result in large increases in the military spending.

17.3.3 The Consequences of Coups

The literature has devoted less attention to the consequences of coups, perhaps because this question faces largely insurmountable identification challenges. There are exceptions, however, that focus on very specific outcome variables for which the outcome of the coups is more plausibly exogenous.

However, the main challenge is in reaching more general conclusions and considering the impact of a more comprehensive list of left-hand-side variables. Here, the difficulty lies in the fact that successful coups always result in a change in regime (at the very least, the leader changes, sometimes also the system of government, sometimes the group in power), and so it is difficult to tease apart the impact of a coup from that of a change in regime. Furthermore, a strategy of using countries that transitioned without a coup as a control for countries that transitioned because of a coup runs into the endogeneity issues we discussed earlier: there will be "selection" into experiencing coups.

Zuk and Thompson (1982) look at the period 1967–1976 and show that post-coup status is not helpful in predicting military spending, but this result does not take into account the endogeneity of experiencing a coup. Leon (2014a) deals with this issue by focusing only on cases in which a coup occurred, and uses failed coups as counterfactuals for successful coups. Dube et al. (2011) look at classified pre-coup authorizations and find that they impact the stock prices of firms expected to benefit from those coups, suggesting that the classified information was available to those firms.

(p. 336) 17.4 Theories of Coups

A fundamental difference between a constitutional democracy and any form of autocracy or dictatorship is that a democratically elected leader depends on the votes of a broadly enfranchised population to stay in office, while the incumbent in an autocracy depends on his or her ability to avoid being overthrown. In a democracy, the transition from one leader to another happens in an orderly and structured fashion; in an autocracy, the transition is typically violent and unorderly. The autocrat has no legitimate or agreed upon mandate to stay in office and, as a consequence, he will tend to be preoccupied with threats to his own political (and sometimes also personal) survival.

Understanding the nature of the threat to political survival—the threat of being overthrown—is the key to unlocking a deeper understanding of how autocracies work and for developing theories of autocracy (Wintrobe 1998, chap. 2; Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003; Besley and Kudamatsu 2008). The starting point for any theory of autocracy must, therefore, be an inquiry into the sources of this threat. An autocratic ruler can be overthrown in many ways or may even, as suggested by Acemoglu and Robinson (2000a), hand over or share power voluntarily. Conceptually, the threat to an autocrat comes from three sources: a revolution, a coup d'état, or intervention by a foreign power. A revolution is understood as an attempt by agents outside the circle of the autocratic ruler and his government to overthrow the autocracy, often through a mass uprising and armed conflict. A coup d'état, on the other hand, is an attempt by agents inside the ruler's government, typically with involvement of the army, to replace the autocratic leadership.[4] Intervention from foreign powers can be through direct military intervention, as in the case of Saddam Hussein in the Second Iraq War, but such instances are relatively rare. More often, foreign intervention amounts to logistical help, intelligence, or limited armed support directed of opposition groups inside the regime (Aidt and Albornoz 2011; Berger et al. 2013).

17.4.1 The Classic Public-Choice Approach to Coups

In his seminal book *Autocracy*, Tullock (1987, part 4) draws out a fundamental difference between revolutions and coups d'état, and forcefully makes the claim that autocratic leaders with control over a moderately effective police force and an army willing to shoot protesters need not be concerned with the threat of revolution, and can consequently focus on avoiding being subject to a coup d'état. In doing so, he builds on his theory of revolution (Tullock 1971).[5] The central tenet of this theory is that a successful revolution is a public good. That is, no matter how unjust, exploitative, or repressive a dictator may be, overthrowing him in favor of a more just, less exploitative, or less repressive regime benefits everyone irrespective of whether they contributed to the overthrow in the first place. At the same time, participation in a revolution is privately costly. Most individuals realize that their impact on the revolution's probability of success is (p. 337) very small, and therefore do not want to participate unless they expect some private reward that outweighs the private cost. For most people, the rational choice is to stay neutral and not participate.[6] The rational calculus underlying participation in a coup d'état is subject to a similar free-rider problem. For high-ranking officials, it is, of course, likely that they will

have a nonmarginal effect on the success probability of the coup, but to Tullock, this is not the key difference between a coup and a revolution. The key difference is that it is costly for government officials inside the regime to remain neutral in a coup attempt. Once a coup is underway, officials must make up their mind quickly as to whether they will support the status quo or join the coup. Staying neutral is, typically, not the rational choice: for lower-level officials in the army, police, or security forces, disobeying direct orders will often carry a high and immediate cost; for higher-level officials, they will realize that they are unlikely to keep their positions and rents in the post-coup situation *whatever* happens if they do not take a side ex-ante (whoever wins will reallocate valuable government jobs to reward those who actively supported them). Either way, staying neutral is costly. Unlike participation in a revolution, participation in an ongoing coup will be the rational choice for many. For this reason, the binding constraint on what an autocrat can and cannot do in office is the threat of a coup d'état originating from the inner circle of power, not the fear of a popular uprising.[7] Competition for power in an autocracy is, in short, regulated by and channeled through the threat of coups d'état.

This logic, however, does not explain how the coup attempt gets initiated, only that if it does, others will have to take sides and the leaders of the coup need to take measures to bring others on board to make the attempt successful.

Both the potential challenger and the incumbent autocrat want to influence the parameters that enter into this calculation. The challenger may bank on the Tullock logic that once the coup gets going, other key players will take their side quickly. Thus, the main task for the challenger is to make sure that they pick his side. A public announcement of who is behind the coup—*pronunciamientos*—helps achieve this and serves as a Schelling point that allows government officials to coordinate their actions (Tullock 1987). However, before it gets to this point, the fundamental problem that potential challengers face is to estimate the extent to which others within the inner circle or the military are willing to support a coup.

17.4.2 The Dictator's Dilemma

The incumbent autocrat who wants to pre-empt a coup knows that there is a threat, but therein lies a dilemma—the "dictator's dilemma" (Wintrobe 1998, 2012). The dictator's dilemma is that the dictator must use his power to threaten, monitor, and repress those around him to make it hard for them to coordinate and plot against him, but they then become reluctant to speak out or to do anything that might displease the ruler. As a result, the dictator learns little about what they really think or are planning and so has all the more reason to fear them. As Wintrobe (1998, 22) puts it, "the greater the dictator's (p. 338) power, the more reason he or she has to be afraid." Wintrobe (1990, 1998) suggests that dictators use two tools to resolve the dilemma: repression and loyalty.

Repression can, as noted, make things worse (by suppressing information flows, it may be harder to stop a coup in the making, and the position of the ruler becomes less secure). But with enough repression, with investment in systems of monitoring and sanctions, and

by “cutting the tallest flowers” to make sure that no one is a viable competitor, by “changing of the guard” or creating competition within the security system to make coordination hard, it can work, as the case of Stalin’s Russia shows.

The problem with loyalty as a solution to the dilemma is that the dictator may promise rewards to his supporters and whistle-blowers, but the supporters have little reason to trust such promises, and giving concession may be seen as a sign of weakness (Acemoglu and Robinson 2000b). In a sense, this is the fundamental point made by Acemoglu and Robinson (2006)’s theory of political transitions: the rulers can only promise transfers when the threat of a revolt is real and therefore in many circumstances they need to change the rules of the game permanently as a way to commit to future transfers. But the problem of commitment also makes it difficult for potential challengers from the inner circle to get others to participate in a coup because their commitment problem is even more severe (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003).

17.4.3 Coup as a Selection Mechanism

In all these models, incumbent rulers are replaced through coups. One might, therefore, be tempted to think that coups serve a role similar to that played by elections in political agency models (Besley 2006; Besley and Kudamatsu 2008). In these models, elections enable voters to select politicians and to discipline them by constraining their behavior (as otherwise they might be voted out). In theory, coups could perform these tasks for nondemocratic governments: they help remove incumbent autocrats or dictators who are not performing as expected, while the threat of a coup might induce them to modify their behavior so as to avoid removal. But there are three key differences. The first is that an incumbent dictator can use repression and threats of violence to reduce the risk of “replacement.” In a democracy, under the rule of law, leaders cannot use repression and threats of violence to prevent opposition parties from challenging them or to intimidate voters into voting in a particular way. The second difference is that the group of people who hold the incumbent to account is not the same: in a democracy, it is the voting population at large, while in an autocracy, it is largely the military and small-group core supporters. These groups, generally speaking, have very different preferences. Consequently, the kind of policies or activities a ruler will be able to implement or do, and the actions for which he might be removed from office, will differ. Even if we think that, in practice, only a subset of voters gets to influence policy in a democracy, the point is still valid. The final difference is that removal of the incumbent ruler through a coup is not just about replacing one ruler with a different one but, typically, it means an unorderly and often violent transition to a different regime. In contrast, in a democracy, (p. 339) elections allow turnover in who controls the government while, on the whole, keeping the underlying institutions the same.

Selectorate theory highlights an additional difference related to how incumbents respond to the threat of removal (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003; Svolik 2009). In this theory, regimes are classified in terms of the relative size of the winning coalition and the selectorate. The selectorate refers to the people who select the leader, while the winning coali-

tion is the group whose support determines whether the leader can hold on to power. In a democracy, the selectorate is the group of voters who turn out to vote, and the winning coalition is the subset who vote for the winner. This, at least in a democracy with universal suffrage, makes the winning coalition large. As a consequence, the (democratic) leader typically relies on providing public goods in order to compensate supporters and avoid being replaced in the next election, because individual transfers (private goods) are more expensive. Since public goods benefit everyone, this in turn means that there are no special benefits to being part of the winning coalition. This makes it relatively easy to replace a democratic leader and thus the identity of the leader will change often.

In autocracies, things are different. Here, the selectorate is large but the winning coalition is typically small. For this reason, it is cost effective for the (autocratic) leader to compensate the few members of the winning coalition with private transfers. They, in turn, have a strong incentive to keep that leader in power because they would lose the private rents if he is replaced in a coup. As a consequence of these systematic differences in how the loyalty of the "winning coalition" gets rewarded under the two systems, coups cannot perform the same role as elections.

17.5 Keeping the Military Happy

An implication of these theories is that coups are rare events: the incumbent is aware of the threat and responds to it. While the coup threat originates from multiple sources, the army and the security apparatus inevitably play a leading role, either in threating or in protecting the incumbent. Dictators, therefore, need to pay particular attention to this part of the selectorate. They can do that either through *accommodation* or through *counterbalancing*.[8]

"Accommodation" refers to the concessions a ruler makes to the armed forces in order to avoid a coup. This can involve changes in policy that are beneficial to the army or direct monetary compensation (what Besley and Robinson 2010 refer to as an "efficiency wage"). It is difficult to test empirically if accommodation is a common strategy, since policy choices (for example, taxes, redistribution, and allocation of public spending) are often the result of complicated decision processes. Furthermore, most payments to the military are either secret or in forms that cannot be easily quantified; for example, they could involve giving the military large construction contracts or control over government owned banks. One exception, however, is military spending (e.g., Leon 2014a). (p. 340) This is quantifiable, even though it might suffer from considerable measurement error, and military spending is clearly something that the armed forces care about. The evidence from recent studies shows that military spending reduces the likelihood of coups, suggesting that high military spending may indeed be a form of accommodation aimed at buying the loyalty of the military.

"Counterbalancing" refers to the actions that a ruler takes to reduce the probability that an attempted coup succeeds. The aim is to dissuade military officers from staging coups in the first place. Some forms of counterbalancing are observable—for example, the exis-

tence of an honor guard or the proliferation of army units—and so this has received a fair amount of attention from the quantitative literature. Quinlivan (1999) studies how regimes can make themselves coup-proof, focusing on Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Syria. He discusses three strategies: the reliance on groups that are highly loyal to the regime, the creation of parallel military organizations, and the reliance on multiple internal security agencies. He goes on to explain that these strategies result in militaries that are weak. Pilster and Boehmelt (2011) show that coup-proofing reduces military leadership and initiative and undermines coordination. As a result, coup-proofing translates into worse performance on the battlefield. Pilster and Boehmelt (2012) examine the extent to which coup-proofing efforts vary across regime types. They find that democracies engage in less coup-proofing. Bove and Rivera (2015) show that an alternative strategy—purging potentially rebellious military officers—increases the risk of coups.

To manage civil–military relations, dictators and other autocratic rulers need to balance internal and external threats. McMahon and Slantchev (2015) argue that a large external threat might make the military more loyal. However, the real problem is asymmetric information about the threat environment: when the threat is expected to be low, the military will be weak and loyal, but unable to cope with large realizations of the threat. On the other hand, if the threat is thought to be large, the military will be strong and loyal, unless the threat turns out to be weak, in which case it might be disloyal. Leon (2014b) puts institutions at the heart of the civil–military dilemma. When institutions are generally weak, military spending increases the probability of winning wars, but also of coups being successful. If institutions are strengthened, the dictator can no longer extract rents, but the military can be made strong without increasing the risk of coups. The model predicts a nonmonotonic relationship between the frequency of wars and coups, which is borne out in the data.

In all, there is evidence that autocratic governments engage in both accommodation and counterbalancing, helping explain why coups are rare events. That the coup constraint can be successfully manipulated in this way suggests that coups are not a particular effective *selection* mechanism. Neither are they good at *disciplining* autocratic governments, at least not in a way that is beneficial for most citizens. In particular, there is evidence that autocrats respond to the coup threat by "buying off" the military in ways that does not benefit the majority of the population.

(p. 341) 17.6 Conclusions and Avenues for Future Research

We began this chapter by discussing the case of Ghana, where Jerry Rawlings overthrew a ruthless dictator simply to go on and establish a new dictatorship. But Jerry Rawlings was not removed by a coup. In 1992, he organized presidential elections—which he won—and governed as a civilian president until term limits forced him to give up office in 2001.

After this, Ghana continued to transition to democracy, and has since experienced no coup-driven changes in government.

It is reassuring that over the last few decades, coups have become less common. Yet not all countries have fared as well as Ghana. Many countries still experience coups—in 2014 and 2015 alone, the list included Burkina Faso, Burundi, Gambia, and Thailand and 2016 saw a failed coup in Turkey. Many countries go through long spells without coups, only to find themselves experiencing several coups in a row; in fact, coups in the past along with measures of political instability are among the most robust predictors of coups (Gassebner et al. 2016). Why coups happen, what consequences they have, and how they can be stopped are questions that are just as important today as they were back in the 1960s and 1970s.

Although there is much that we have learned about coups, there are still areas that require further research. In particular, the discussion of counterbalancing has brought into relief the importance of the internal organization and politics of the military. In the framework presented here, and in much of the public-choice literature, the military is taken as a unitary actor that interacts with the government and perhaps other country-level actors. There are good reasons for doing this, as it makes the problems tractable. However, it is also important to consider the internal organization of the military, since only then can we address questions including how they solve their collective-action problem. Coups, and civil–military relations more generally, continue to be a fascinating but challenging area of research.

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Notes:

(1.) Powell and Thyne (2011, 252) define coups as ‘‘illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive.” Our definition differs from this in that we focus mostly on what they call “military coups”—i.e., those where part of the military plays a role. Both definitions are about coup attempts.

(2.) Belkin and Schofer (2003) predate the start of the Syrian civil war, which has now made their example even more compelling than it was originally.

(3.) Londregan and Poole (1990) also find that economic growth inhibits coups while coups in the recent past increase the likelihood of a coup, which is in line the EBA.

(4.) Coup d’état can also be directed against democracies, as in Chile in 1973 or in Germany in 1933. This is modeled in the political regime transition model by Acemoglu and Robinson (2001). Gilli and Li (2015) study the interaction between revolution and coup constraints.

(5.) Tullock (in Rowley 2006) collects the key material. Tullock’s theory of revolution builds on Olson’s (1971) logic of collection action by emphasizing the public-goods nature of a revolution.

(6.) The cascade models of Kuran (1989), Granovetter (1978), and Lohmann (1994) stress social effects in the decisions to participate in a revolution or mass protest. With such effects at play, a relatively small group of hard-core revolutionaries or protesters can draw in more moderate individuals.

(7.) This is not to say that autocrats never lose power through mass protests or popular uprisings. Aidt and Leon (2016) have recently shown that riots in sub-Saharan Africa led to moves toward democracy. The fall of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe provides several additional examples. Apolte (2016) argues that the way to understand these events is to realize that the popular protest in and of itself was not sufficient. The Eastern European protests could have been put down with force. Rather, the key is that the lead-

ership lost the support of its army chiefs. For them, a violent crackdown would have required them to test the loyalty of their subordinates, and they may have reasoned that the least-cost action was to instead support a new regime, which would put an end to the protests without the need for violent repression.

(8.) Wintrobe (1998) would refer to loyalty and repression.

Toke Aidt

Toke Aidt is University Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Economics at the University of Cambridge.

Gabriel Leon

Gabriel Leon is a Lecturer in Political Economy in the Department of Political Economy at King's College London.