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THE FORUM

Forum: A Coup At the Capitol? Conceptualizing Coups and Other Antidemocratic Actions

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The term "coup" has been used to describe a diverse range of events. Although recent decades have seen the academic study of coups focus on an increasingly narrow type of military intervention in politics, the general public, governments, and international organizations frequently apply the coup label to a broader set of antidemocratic actions. This was dramatically illustrated after the overrunning of the US Capitol Building on January 6, 2021, when discussions of the event led to debates about whether or not it constituted a coup. More than a mere matter of semantics, describing an event as a coup can have analytical, normative, and practical implications. The scholars in this forum explore the challenges inherent in distinguishing coups from other types of antidemocratic actions, highlight gaps between academic and popular conceptions of the term, and identify ways in which scholars can productively contribute to public debates around contentious events.

El término "golpe de Estado" se ha utilizado para describir una gran variedad de acontecimientos. Aunque en las últimas décadas el estudio académico de los golpes de Estado se ha centrado en un tipo cada vez más limitado de intervención militar en la política, el público en general,

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los gobiernos y las organizaciones internacionales suelen aplicar la etiqueta de "golpe de Estado" a un conjunto más amplio de acciones antidemocráticas. Esto quedó dramáticamente reflejado tras el asalto al edificio del Capitolio de Estados Unidos el 6 de enero de 2021, cuando los debates sobre el acontecimiento llevaron a plantear si constituía o no un golpe de Estado. El hecho de describir un acontecimiento como un golpe de estado puede tener implicaciones analíticas, normativas y prácticas; no es solo una cuestión semántica. Los especialistas en esta discusión analizan los desafíos inherentes a la distinción de los golpes de Estado de otros tipos de acciones antidemocráticas, ponen de relieve las diferencias entre las concepciones académicas y populares del término, e identifican las formas en que los especialistas pueden contribuir de forma productiva a los debates públicos en torno a los acontecimientos polémicos.

Le terme « coup d'état » a été utilisé pour décrire toute une série diversifiée d'événements. Bien que les dernières décennies aient connu une étude universitaire des coups d'état se concentrant sur un type de plus en plus réduit d'interventions militaires en politique, le grand public, les gouvernements et les organisations internationales appliquent fréquemment l'appellation de coup d'état à un ensemble plus large d'actions anti-démocratiques. Cela a été illustré d'une manière spectaculaire suite à l'invasion du Capitole américain le 6 janvier 2021 lorsque les discussions concernant l'événement ont mené à des débats visant à déterminer si cet événement constituait un coup d'état. Plus qu'une simple question de sémantique, décrire un événement comme un coup d'état peut avoir des implications analytiques, normatives et pratiques. Les chercheurs de cette tribune explorent les défis inhérents à la distinction entre les coups d'état et d'autres types d'actions anti-démocratiques, mettent en évidence les écarts entre les conceptions académiques et populaires du terme et identifient les moyens par lesquels les chercheurs peuvent contribuer de manière productive aux débats publics autour d'événements controversés.

Keywords: coup d'etat, insurrection, civil–military relations
Palabras clave: golpe de estado, insurrección, relaciones cívico-militares
Mots clés: coup d'état, insurrection, relations entre civils et militaires

Introduction: Revisiting Coup Conceptualizations Over Time

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On January 6, 2021, a mob of supporters of the US President Donald Trump violently stormed the US Capitol Building in hope of delaying the 117th Congress's certification of the 2020 Presidential election. The election results indicated President-elect Joe Biden's victory over Trump. After weeks of promoting false allegations of a rigged election, Trump and his affiliates gathered thousands of supporters at the nation's capital to seemingly protest the results. However, following Vice-President Mike Pence's refusal to reject the election's results, Trump urged his supporters to march upon the Capitol Building. The situation devolved into chaos as his followers overwhelmed Capitol police units and violently breached the building. As Congress members were escorted into hiding places, rioters stormed into the Senate Hall,

proclaimed their desire to overturn the election, and called for violence against "treasonous" lawmakers. Members of the National Guard were eventually deployed, and the rioters were removed from the Capitol Building.

While this attack did not successfully overturn the 2020 election results, it did prompt a serious discussion about the event's label in public discourse. Namely, did the Capitol's storming constitute an attempted coup? A disconnect on the term's usage emerged between the public and the media on one side, and coup scholars on the other. This introduction to the forum provides an overview of the term's development over time and its usage in contemporary social science. Specifically, we explain that while today's narrow definitions have allowed scholars to focus on the causes and motives of explicit "coup events," other important events—many of which historically fell under the label of coups—are disregarded as being beyond the scope of coups.

Conceptualizing Coups

Given the broad scope of political events that have fallen under the coup label, it is unsurprising that there is debate over its usage. The seventeenth-century French scholar Gabriel Naudé offers the earliest serious conceptualization. His definition considers coups as "bold and extraordinary acts that princes are forced to undertake in difficult and hopeless matters, contrary to common law and regardless of any justice, putting the particular interest at stake for the benefit of the general one" (Naudé 1639, 103). Rather than actions undertaken directly against the state, this approach refers to action undertaken *by the state* for what is argued to be the common good. This label was notably applied to King Louis XIII's 1628 military actions against the Huguenots at La Rochelle. In the mind of Naudé (1639), the "bold and extraordinary acts of princes" were meant to preserve—rather than undermine—the current authority.

While modern uses also require the state's involvement in a coup, Naudé's approach differs as he does not consider actions seeking to overturn an incumbent. Indicating common usage in English, the Oxford English Dictionary defined coups as "a sudden and decisive stroke of state policy; a sudden and great change in the government carried out violently or illegally *by the ruling power*" (Rapoport 1966). However, the term's meaning would see a shift after the French Revolution. Instead of capturing efforts by royals against their opponents, the term captured acts undertaken both by and against a regime's political leadership. In France alone, the term would come to describe events as diverse as General Napoleon Bonaparte's seizure of power from the Directory in November 1799, Claude Francois de Malet's October 1812 effort to oust Napoleon, Napoleon's return to power from exile, and Napoleon III's dissolving of the National Assembly in December 1851.

Rapoport (1966) concludes that by the third edition of Webster's International Dictionary (published in 1961), the term coup had come to capture a "sudden decisive exercise of localized or concentrated force unseating the personnel of government," thereby "reversing the definitional order." However, this evolution occurred quite earlier, with at least the 1907 version of the dictionary defining a coup as "a sudden, decisive exercise of power whereby *the existing government is subverted* without the consent of the people."

Like prior usages, academic approaches to defining coups would largely follow historical developments. The twentieth century saw the evolution of scholarly approaches to studying coups (see table 1). Just as the French Revolution marked a shift from actions by the ruling elite to actions against the ruling elite, this period would see emphasis shift toward acts by the military. This shift is highlighted in the definitions by Finer (1962), Welch (1967), Thompson (1973), and later by McGowan (2003). Coup scholarship here emerged in response to the waves of military coups in the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, resulting in the common inclusion of soldiers as the main perpetrators.

Table 1. Conceptual approaches to coups d'état

Source	Definition
Naudé (1639)	"Bold and extraordinary acts that princes are forced to undertake in difficult and hopeless matters, contrary to common law and regardless of any justice, putting the particular interest at stake for the benefit of the general one."
Finer (1962)	"The armed forces' constrained substitution of their own policies and/or their persons, for those of the recognized civilian authorities."
Welch (1967)	"Direct military intervention, aimed at unseating civilian governments and replacing them with ruling councils largely drawn from the military."
Luttwak (1968)	"The infiltration of a small but critical segment of the state apparatus, which is then used to displace the government from its control of the remainder."
Thompson (1973)	"Members of the regular armed forces remove or attempt to remove a state's chief executive through the use or threat of force."
O'Kane (1981)	"An unexpected attack on the heart of the administration by the threat or use of violence by a small constitutional group from within the state apparatus to overthrow the government."
McGowan (2003)	"Events or attempts at events in which existing regimes are suddenly and illegally displaced by the action of a relatively small group, in which members of the military, police or security forces of the state play a key role, either on their own or in conjunction with civilian elites such as civil servants, politicians, and monarchs."
Marshall and Marshall (2007, 2019)	"A forceful seizure of executive authority and office by a dissident/opposition faction within the country's ruling or political elites that results in a substantial change in the executive leadership and the policies of the prior regime."
Powell and Thyne (2011)	"Illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive."
Svolik (2012)	"A forced removal of an authoritarian leader by any regime insider."
Nardulli et al. (2013)	"Organized efforts to effect sudden and irregular (e.g., illegal or extra-legal) removal of the incumbent executive authority of a national government, or to displace the authority of the highest levels of one or more branches of government."
Singh (2014)	"Overt collective actions by a coalition including some portion of a country's armed forces, police, or paramilitary forces, with the intent to overthrow the government."
Bjørnskov and Rode (2019)	"An event in which an actor or some actors previously linked to the state apparatus attempt to take power over the executive branch of the government in less than seven days."
Chin, Carter, and Wright (2021)	"The incumbent ruling regime or regime leader is ousted from power (or a presumptive regime leader is prevented from taking power) as a result of concrete, observable, and unconstitutional actions by one or more civilian members of the incumbent ruling regime and/or one or more members of the military or security apparatus.

However, an exclusive focus on soldiers was never universal. Luttwak's (1968) definition considered coup perpetrators to be any critical segment of the state apparatus, a view shared by O'Kane (1981). Contemporary efforts also reflect a broader scope of actors. Apart from studies aimed specifically at explaining military-led coups (e.g., Singh 2014), recent efforts systematically account for coups that have included civilian aspects of the state, indicating a clear departure from the Cold War-era focus. Quantitative efforts in the last decade have seen a particular reliance on

the Powell and Thyne (2011) coup conceptualization (e.g., Sudduth 2017a, 2017b; De Bruin 2019, 2020a; Schiel 2019; Dwyer and Tansey 2020; Meng 2021).

These definitions complicate attempts to label the January 6 event as a coup. Each conceptualization understands coups as actions undertaken *against an incumbent,* not presumed successors. The Capitol attack occurred during Trump's incumbency, prior to Biden's official inauguration. Contemporary definitions also require the action to be undertaken by an element of the state apparatus, a label that does not apply to the mob of rioters. Even invoking Naudé's definition—which described actions aimed at preserving the regime—is problematic, given that the mob would not qualify as princes. Consequently, the January 6 event has also earned the label of self-coup, or autogolpe. Marshall and Marshall (2019, 3) consider "auto-coups" and have clarified that Trump's actions since the election qualify. They do, however, make it clear that these are "not considered coup events."

Datasets measuring political instability, such as Banks' Cross-National Time-Series Dataset (2001) and the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)-armed conflict datasets, often conflate different forms of violent anti-regime behavior such as coups, mass protests, and civil wars. While this approach may be appropriate for broadly understanding a country's domestic turmoil, Powell and Thyne (2011, 251) argue that scholars should appreciate the differences between coups and events such as civil wars and mass protests, arguing these to be distinct tactics undertaken by different actors with—presumably—differing motives.

Studies assessing the nexus between coups and other forms of political violence suggest that the differences are relevant. Roessler (2011) and Powell (2014, 2019) show that authoritarian leaders often employ self-sabotaging forms of "coup-proofing" at the higher risk of civil war, suggesting a distinction between the triggers of coups and civil wars. Likewise, Bell and Sudduth (2017) focus on coup determinants during ongoing civil wars while White (2020) assesses coup determinants in post-civil-war contexts, paying specific attention to *military* grievances as a distinct driver for such events. Casper and Tyson (2014) delineate the distinct actors in coups and protests by theorizing that popular protest movements against an incumbent can inform state elites on the likelihood of a successful coup. Johnson and Thyne (2018) distinguish between coups and protests by theorizing why these events often occur simultaneously. This is appropriate given that popular protests accompanied well-known coup events such as the 2011 ouster of the Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak and Mohammed Morsi's 2013 removal. While mass protests may have mobilized state elites to strike the incumbent, the *elites*' decisions determined the leaders' fates.

Moving Forward

Conceptual clarification has allowed scholars to focus on a specific type of event, avoiding the conflation of coups with other acts such as civil wars and protests. This is important, as actions undertaken by different actors via different tactics will likely have varying causes and consequences. However, several efforts investigating events narrowly missing the coup criteria have accompanied this nuance. This suggests that contemporary scholarship places a disproportionate emphasis on one of several forms of irregular change or maintenance of power, a potentially troubling tendency given the relative decline of coups in recent decades (Kendall-Taylor and Frantz 2014). Further, scholars have rarely considered the implications of these definitions beyond the confines of scholarship despite such labels having important policy implications.

This forum explores the challenge of conceptualizing coups at different levels. Amy Erica Smith and Lucas Borba consider the use of the coup label by the masses using Google Trends data. Beyond showing the use of the concept by country and over time in the Americas, their contribution explores the inevitability of "coup"

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

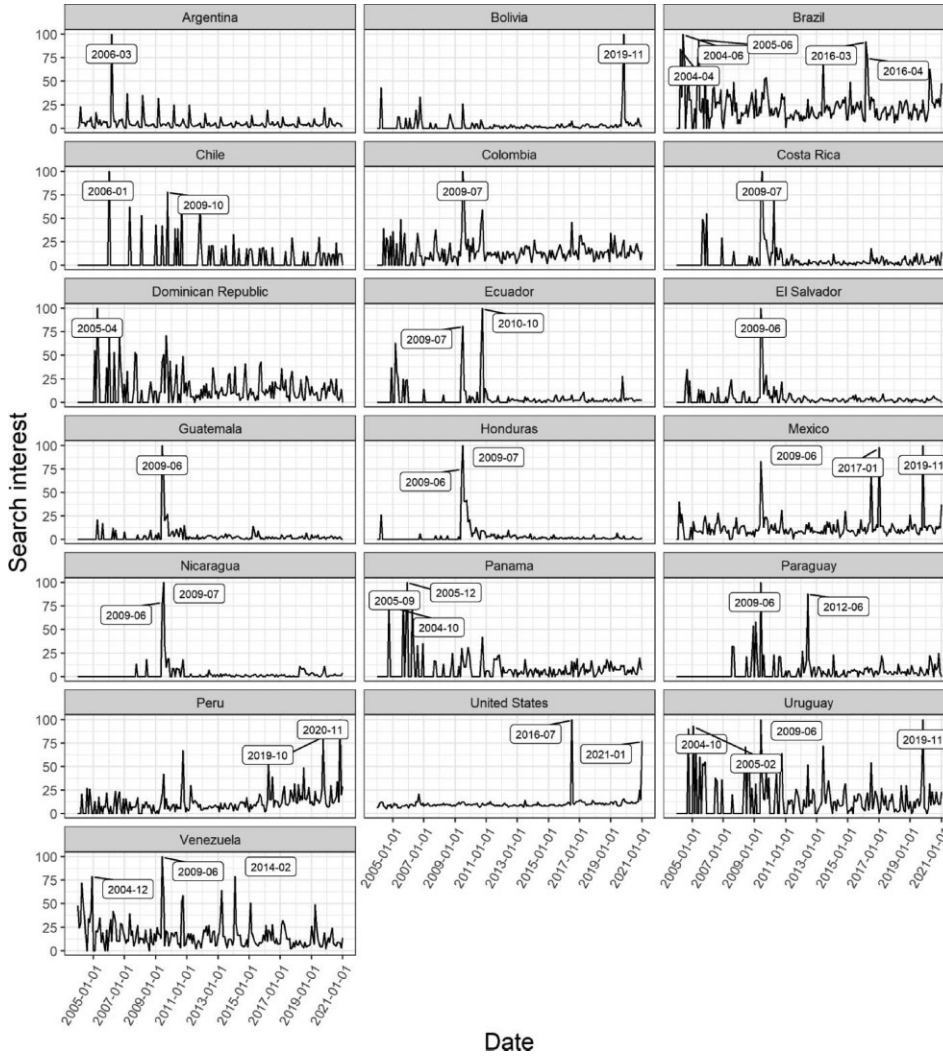

Figure 1. Interest in the terms "coup" and "golpe de estado" over time in Latin America.

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.

This typology is not carved in stone; for instance, a third dimension might code whether the perpetrator is a state or non-state actor, following Marsteintredet and Malamud (2020, 1026–29). Regardless of the details, such a typology helps synthesize and communicate extant scholarship on the nature and consequences of different types of democratic interference. As just one example, history and democratic theory indicate that events in the bottom row may be more dangerous for democracy than events in the top row.

What we are proposing, then, is a change in how scholars listen and respond to citizens who allege coups. When a netizen protests against a venal legislature impeaching her president, responding that the impeachment is "not a coup" accurately reflects mainstream contemporary academic vocabulary. However, it is not particularly enlightening; policing conceptual boundaries established by academics and international institutions matters little to our netizen, who is still understandably angry. Worse, it can appear to be an assertion of academic power that minimizes her normative concerns. An alternative approach might sidestep the coup debate, implicitly accepting the essentially contested nature of the concept, and instead focus on productive lessons from academic research. Such an approach would be bad news for public-facing scholarship dissecting claims of "coups," but it might be good news for public discourse.

Conservative Coup Advocacy in the United States

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This essay uses research on civilian support for and involvement in coups to contribute to the debate about Donald Trump's efforts to remain in power beyond his legal term as the President of the United States. It introduces the concept of *coup advocacy*—or efforts by civilians to promote a coup in support of a wider political cause. I argue in favor of a simple definition of a coup d'état: a coordinated and rapid attempt to seize executive authority by violent or extralegal means. This definition centers classification of coups on the aims and actions of perpetrators, rather than their identity, and is broad enough to capture both traditional coups and "self-coups," as well as the storming of the US Capitol on January 6.

Whether or not the event is classified as a coup, however, I argue that it should be viewed within a wider context of an antidemocratic, civilian-led movement that promoted violence to keep Donald Trump in the White House. This effort also included a more overt plan floated by retired General Michael Flynn, and later pushed privately by President Trump, which invited the US military to weigh-in on a civilian political dispute in favor of conservatives.[5] Civilian coup advocacy such as this undermines norms needed to preserve democratic life, such as the prohibition against extralegal and violent political competition, as well as the norm of civilian supremacy over the military. It signals to the conservative bloc that in *exceptional* political circumstances the army's assistance is *crucial*, not forbidden.

The lens of civilian coup advocacy highlights political conditions in which segments of the elite advocate for coups. In this case, it is the conservative *civilian* elites in the Republican Party's orbit that are the biggest threat to US democracy—not the US armed forces. Conservative coup advocates are paving the way for future coups and unrest by anointing their followers "men on horseback" (Finer 1962), or saviors of the nation that the Trump world envisions. This behavior is an expected

[5] I use the term "conservative" to describe Donald Trump and his supporters in the Republican Party because this is what is commonly used in the US political discourse, although I recognize that they are not ideological conservatives.

response to two conditions—polarization and perceived electoral disadvantages—that have previously produced high rates of coup advocacy in the Middle East.

Polarization, Election Fears, and Conservative Coup Advocacy

Civilian *coup advocacy* is the willing promotion of a coup d'état in support of a wider political cause. It takes a variety of forms, from public incitement, which legitimates the use of violence, to overt participation in coup attempts. Civilians including businesspersons, religious leaders, politicians, and ordinary protesters provide resources (e.g., money, office-holding, public platforms, social capital) to coup movements. Most commonly, civilians aid soldiers in staging coups, but civilians can also seize power independent of the army. In many Middle Eastern states, for instance, both civilian elites and segments of the broader public have regularly advocated for coups under *polarized* conditions in which there is also fear of *electoral disadvantages* (Kinney 2019, 2021).

These same conditions are now present in the United States. Both the US electorate and the Congress are highly polarized (Neal 2020). As a result, conservative elites have grown unwilling to countenance the rule of their liberal counterparts and are pressured not to compromise by their base.[6] Add to this the fact that United States' conservatives fear they cannot fairly compete in electoral contests (Badger 2020). The country's electoral machinery functions properly, but Republican electoral prospects are waning due to the party's unpopularity (Astor 2020). Conservatives *believe*—rightly or wrongly—that the odds of victory are stacked against them. Backed into the corners of their minds, the Republican Party has turned to antidemocratic tactics, especially voting restrictions. This effort has long involved incitement to various forms of political violence. After November 2020, however, conservatives' anti-democratic repertoire expanded to urging extralegal transfers of authority and even the armed forces' involvement in political competition. This is a typical trajectory for coup advocates. After backing Iraqi General Bakr Sidqi's coup in 1936, for instance, politician Hikmat Suleiman said, "There was nothing left for us except the Army … so we resorted to the Army" (cited in Tarbush 1982, 121). If US voters will not give conservatives the keys to the White House, they will force themselves in at gunpoint.

What's in a Coup?

I define a coup as a *coordinated* movement to *rapidly* seize control of a polity's *executive* authority by extralegal means with at least the threat of violence. The requirements for rapid, coordinated action are in line with many of the academic definitions of coups described by Powell and Ben Hammou in this forum's introduction. Coups involve coordinated action; they are not spontaneous or unplanned. Coup participants have disparate but predefined roles that are meant to produce a singular outcome. In short, a coup must have a plan, even if it is a bad plan. Coups are also carried out over a short time span, with clearly definable beginning and end points. It is this feature of coups that allows relatively small conspiratorial cliques to find themselves in control of the state. If they fail, the status quo remains and the perpetrators have to plan their next move.

Where this definition diverges from those commonly used in academic work is broadening the target of a coup from an incumbent that is currently in power to *executive authority*. This target is broad enough to encompass those who stormed the US Capitol on January 6; while the attack was on Congress, the target was the incoming chief executive, the then President-elect Joe Biden. The aim was to restore authority that was voted away from President Trump in November 2020.

[6] New research on "right-wing authoritarianism" supports this claim (Knuckey and Hassan 2020).

This definition also relaxes the requirement, present in many (but not all) academic definitions of coups, that coup perpetrators come from within the state or coercive apparatus (e.g., Powell and Thyne 2011; Chin, Carter, and Wright 2021; Singh 2021). I do not argue that the identities of coup perpetrators are unimportant or inconsequential. Quite the contrary, different types of actors offer disparate but important power resources to coup movements (e.g., Singh 2014; Kinney 2019, 2021; Holmes 2021, 5). Civilian coup advocates, for instance, often do not directly participate in the *execution* of coups but use whatever power resources they possess in order to foment them—as I will argue Donald Trump did on January 6.

However, in practice, coups are instigated by a wide range of actors. Members of the military execute *military* coups, which can be further dissected by officer rank, motivation, and context; civilians and soldiers can jointly carry out *civil–military* coups, which may be mostly civilian-led or merely receive strong civilian support in the form of protests or media incitement; and civilians are responsible for purely *civilian* coups, which can involve a countless number of sociopolitical configurations, including state and non-state actors, oligarchs, politicians, and more. In contrast to more restrictive definitions that require involvement from actors within the state apparatus, the definition used here would thus include what Cline Center describes as a "dissident coup"—one that is "initiated by a small group of discontents to include ex-military leaders, religious leaders, former government leaders, members of a legislature/parliament, and civilians" (Cline Center 2021). The following section weighs the evidence on whether events on January 6 amounted to a coup according to this definition.

Trump Supporters on Horseback: Storming the US Capitol

The storming of the US Capitol on January 6 fits the definition of a civilian coup attempt described above. While there is no smoking gun tying President Trump to the assault on the Capitol, the coup attempt nevertheless appears to blur the boundaries between a self-coup and a traditional coup. On the one hand, Trump did not use (probably because it was not possible) the typical self-coup tool kit, for example, shelving the constitution or adjourning the legislature (De Bruin 2020b). On the other hand, the attack represented a continuation of President Trump's months-long effort to overturn the November 2020 election and remain in office. Led by armed extremist groups, the Capitol invaders targeted governmental officials as a means to the clearly stated end of keeping President Trump in the White House by disrupting the transfer of executive authority to President-elect Biden (Bennett et al. 2021).

Although the Capitol storming failed to keep Trump in office, there is an abundance of evidence that it was a planned effort rather than the manifestation of overly enflamed mob passion. Federal investigators have concluded that armed right-wing extremists, such as the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers, carefully plotted "an armed assault on the seat of American government" (Barrett, Hsu, and Davis 2021, 5–6). They led parts of the crowd to specific points of the building to overwhelm police. The extremists engaged the throngs of civilian protesters in pre-discussed chants (e.g., "Hang Mike Pence!") designed to incite a level of violence necessary for their plan to unfold (Leonhardt 2021, 6). Two pipe bombs were discovered: one near the Republican National Committee building and another near the Democratic National Committee headquarters (Leatherby et al. 2021, 9)—an unlikely coincidence without pre-coordination.

The violence on January 6 had been incited for weeks and there were ongoing protests in Washington, DC, leading up to the event, but the coup operation was designed to be a short, one-off assault on the Capitol Building. The moment of execution was intentionally chosen to disrupt Congress's ability to certify the election for President-elect Biden. In a planned speech to the crowd moments before the

attack, President Trump conferred the legitimacy of the highest office in the land on the violent plans of the coup organizers. Funneling these Trump-supporters-on-horseback toward the Capitol Building as the certification process was unfolding, the event's organizers used the crowds like pawns on a bloody chessboard. Their scheme was thwarted within hours.

While the storming of the Capitol did not involve the current members of the state or coercive apparatus, there was heavy involvement by both active duty and retired servicemembers, especially of the far-right Oath Keepers (Leonhardt 2021, 14). While acting in an unofficial capacity, their positions within the state conferred tactical knowledge used in the attack. Their participation also reveals a right-wing faction within the US coercive apparatus. Disregarding their connection to this assault in a discussion of coup classification serves only to maintain a conceptual division between the state and the society—one many coup attempts, including the Capitol storming, reveal to be a fiction.

A *network* of conservative leaders and activists both inside and outside of government helped to plan and incite the day's violence. The Chair of the Arizona Republican Party, Kelli Ward, tweeted on December 19, 2020, that President Trump should "cross the Rubicon" (Cunningham-Cook 2021, 1–2), specifically referencing Julius Caesar's violation of the Roman norm of civilian supremacy over soldiers. Ward amplified the violent rhetoric of one of the event's main organizers, Ali Alexander, an early leader of the "Stop the Steal" movement with ties to wealthy GOP donors. In the lead up to the Capitol storming, Alexander explicitly and repeatedly encouraged the use of violence, such as imploring demonstrators to "1776" (violently overthrow) elected US officials on January 6 (Cunningham-Cook 2021, 2; Grim and Chávez 2021, 21). Republican representatives such as Andy Biggs (Arizona), leader of the House Freedom Caucus; Paul Gosar (Arizona); and Mo Brooks (Alabama) helped Alexander organize the January 6 rally despite his explicit appeals to violence. Although all three tried to distance themselves from the event when it failed, *during* the assault Rep. Gosar posted on Parler (an alternative to Twitter) that "Americans are upset," alongside a photograph showing "rioters climbing the Capitol walls" (Grim and Chávez 2021, 19). Given the public nature of the Capitol invaders' intentions, it is difficult to accept that these officials were unaware of what was being planned.

It is meaningful when public officials use their platform to advocate for coups because they possess the legitimacy of their office and have the power to influence their followers. More concerning, however, are credible allegations that elected GOP officials offered "reconnaissance tours" ahead of January 6 to would-be perpetrators of the attack (Cheney and Ferris 2021). If true, members of the GOP went beyond public incitement to active participation. This would satisfy even more conservative definitions of coups that require participation of perpetrators from within the state apparatus.

President Trump's responsibility in this affair also complicates the distinction between state and non-state actors. As Commander-in-Chief, the president authorizes the use of legitimate violence. President Trump tried to form a coalition with armed non-state actors by courting extremist groups—including an explicit endorsement of one of the coup participants, the Proud Boys, during a nationally televised presidential debate (Ronayne and Kunzelman 2020). This dynamic is similar to the *baltajiyya* (regime thugs) that protect Arab autocrats when requested by the state. Indeed, many in the mob were taking orders from the President. Some shouted at police, "We are listening to your boss: Trump," and others claimed to find moral courage from GOP Sen. Ted Cruz (Leonhardt 2021, 13). Many who stormed the Capitol Building have even adopted the "*public* [i.e., state] *authority* defense" or in other words: "The president told me to do it" (Shamsian 2021, 6). Based on public reporting and testimony from President Trump's second impeachment trial, he was aware that an armed mob was descending on Washington, DC, to violently

protect him but still used rhetoric borrowed from event organizers to incite the mob. Trump then assisted the assault with inaction because he was pleased with the outcome (Leonhardt 2021, 3).

The Flynn–Trump Plan: Inciting a Coup

Although it did not receive as much fanfare as the Capitol storming, in December 2020, retired General Michael Flynn publicly offered an exceptional proposal to invite the armed forces into an overtly political role that would favor conservatives. On December 1, General Flynn floated the idea on Twitter, on behalf of the "We The People Convention," to declare martial law, place federal troops in swing states, and "rerun" the elections in those states. In mid-December, Flynn repeated the idea on *Newsmax*, a media outlet President Trump promoted to loyalists (Sommerlad 2020). Alarmingly, Trump pushed the plan at an official White House meeting later that week.[7] That December 18 meeting pitted "conspiracists against a handful of White House lawyers and advisers determined to keep the president from giving in to temptation to invoke emergency national security powers, seize voting machines and disable the primary levers of American democracy" (Swan and Basu 2021, 7). During the gathering, *Overstock.com* CEO Patrick Byrne, a Trump ally, exclaimed, "There are guys with big guns and badges who can get these things [i.e., seize voting machines]" (quoted in Swan and Basu 2021, 64). The (far-fetched) idea was to declare a state of exception, thus giving conservatives the power to use the military in their battle with the Democratic Party.

Why should we pay attention to this instance of civilian coup advocacy if it did not result in an overt coup attempt? The point is not whether it had a chance to succeed but that it establishes two dangerous normative precedents. First, it undermines the legitimacy of elections to settle political differences and instead urges political violence against opponents. Second, coup advocacy lays the groundwork for *military* coups by undermining the norm stigmatizing the armed forces' involvement in civilian disputes. Scholars of coups tend to agree that coup perpetrators need legitimacy to subvert normal political processes (e.g., Powell 2012; Whitehouse 2012; Casper and Tyson 2014). Coup advocates legitimate the military's entrance into politics by telling their constituents that in *exceptional* circumstances the army's assistance is *crucial*, not forbidden. When elites call publicly for an *exceptional* maneuver (e.g., a coup), they are placing their actions within an intelligible political context. Conservative voters cannot cheer on a coup until conservative elites have explained to them why they should. In the conservative milieu, the argument for taking this exceptional step was plain: they were rectifying an unfair electoral outcome. If Republicans believe that the election was stolen—and that the failure of Trump's legal challenges is the work of sinister forces—then they will believe that political violence is their only remaining option.

Conclusion

This essay argued in favor of a definition of coups that does not restrict perpetrators to those within the state and includes efforts to perpetuate executive authority. It argues that the Capitol storming constituted a civilian coup attempt and that the Flynn–Trump plan was a politically important instance of coup advocacy. Both of these incidents suggest that a violent bloc of civilians is determined to undermine the US democracy. While debates over coup classification are important, one must not lose sight of the underlying conditions in which coups become a legitimate tool for political competition. GOP *civilians* are the biggest threat to US democracy—

[7] There is no evidence, as far as I know, that Flynn and Trump were in direct contact or "plotting" with one another. This is an instance of *coup incitement*, which is a type of coup advocacy.

not the military. Like their Middle Eastern counterparts, coup advocates in the GOP respond to polarization and electoral disadvantages by paving the way for coups.

The African Union and Unconstitutional Changes of Government

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The post-Cold War period has witnessed a decline in coups. In fact, rarely have attempts at coups been witnessed in advanced industrialized states. It was, therefore, surprising to many observers that on January 6, 2021, a mob of Donald Trump's supporters stormed the US Capitol with the aim of subverting the US Senate's certification of the winner of the 2020 elections. Although resembling an attempt at unconstitutionally changing a government, this storming nonetheless generated tremendous discussions on what exactly defines a coup. Such discussions are not new: In Africa, after decades of reluctance by member states of the Organization for African Unity (OAU) and its successor, the AU, to acknowledge and respond to coup events particularly during the Cold War period, several agreements were signed and ratified in the post-Cold War period with the aim of defining and responding to coups and other unconstitutional changes of government (UCG).

While this multilateral approach to defining UCG has been heralded as contributing to good governance and democracy in Africa, a closer inspection on the application of the OAU/AU policy on UCG reveals certain inconsistencies. For example, following the military coup in Zimbabwe in 2017 against Robert Mugabe, the AU refrained from calling this overthrow a coup, effectively endorsing the army's takeover. Contrastingly, the AU swiftly condemned the overthrow of Omar al Bashar in Sudan in April 2019 and suspended Sudan from the AU. This essay sheds lights on inconsistencies in the AU's definition of coups and related UCG by summarizing the evolution and application of the AU's policy on UCG. This review informs the debate on how coups and other types of UCG, such as the storming of the US Capitol, are defined by placing focus on how international organizations approach such illegal actions. The inconsistencies of the AU's UCG policy suggest that a multilateral legalistic definition of coups and other illegal seizures of power has not settled the debate like that which followed the storming of the US Capitol. Instead, the evolution of the AU's UCG policy points at some gradual convergence among states on what are UCG and how to react to them.

AU's Policy on UCG

UCG have been characteristic of the political history of post-colonial Africa. Figure 2 depicts the total number of attempted and successful coups in Africa between 1960 and 2021. As the figure shows, a higher number of coups were attempted and succeeded during the Cold War period. Since the 2000s, however, there have been relatively fewer coup events in Africa.[8] These post-2000s trends, as some have argued, point at the divergent policy approaches toward coups and other illegal seizures of powers that the OAU and its successor organization, the AU, have pursued. Further institutionalization of the AU's UCG policy, specifically the threat and use of sanctions against coup-born regimes, has been argued to have contributed to fewer coups under the AU compared to the OAU.

For most of its existence, the OAU did not have a specific policy on how to respond to UCG. Instead, the OAU relied on Article 3 of its founding

[8] The exception is 2021 that has witnessed six coup attempts and four successful coups.

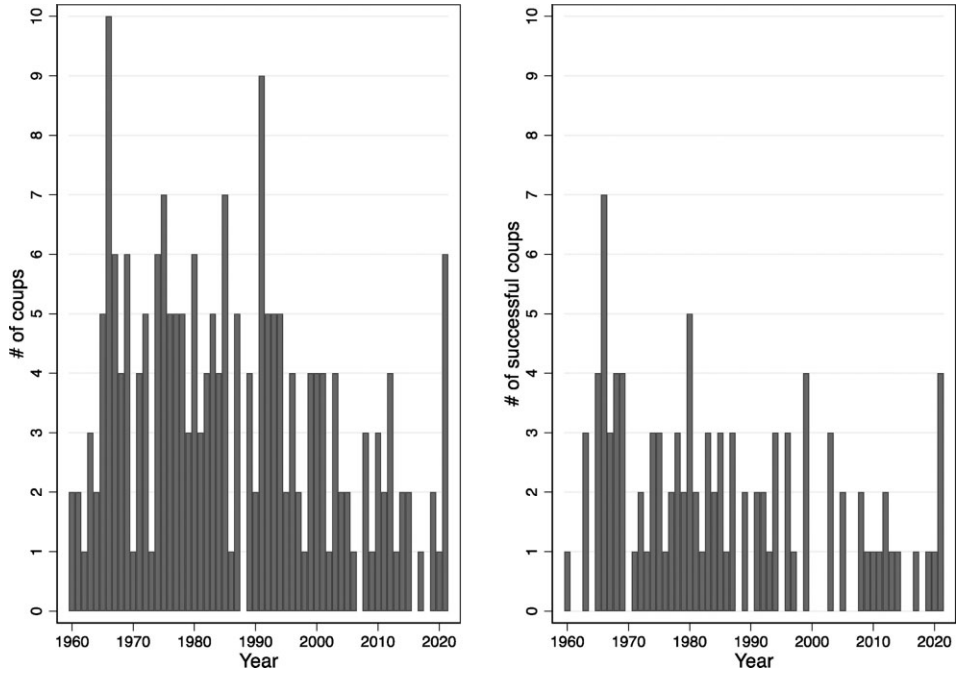

Figure 2. Coups d'état in Africa, 1960–2021.
Source: Powell and Thyne (2011).

charter that outlined the organization's core principles. These principles included "noninterference in the internal affairs of states." The principle of noninterference came to characterize much of the OAU's approach to coups and other illegal power seizures. Omorogbe (2011, 126) point out that although "the OAU condemned violent coups and assassinations of political leaders as unlawful under the OAU Charter," the organization nonetheless "usually accepted whichever government was in effective control of the territory and allowed that government to represent its state within the OAU."

The end of the Cold War marked a turning point for the OAU and its policy toward UCG. Through two agreements promulgated during the latter years of the OAU and one agreement following the establishment of the AU, a clearer policy on how to respond to coups and other UCG has been articulated. The first of these agreements was the 1999 Algiers decision on UCG. The Algiers decision called on a return to constitutional rule in those countries that had experienced illegal power seizures since the 1997 Harare Summit. It further empowered the OAU Secretary-General to be actively involved in facilitating a return to democratic governance in those countries that had experienced unconstitutional power changes (Algiers 1999).

Further clarity came in the second agreement, the 2000 Lomé Declaration on the framework for an OAU response to UCG. The Lomé Declaration defined what constitutes an unconstitutional change of government and guidelines on what actions the OAU was to take following such illegal power changes. UCG, according to the Lomé Declaration, included coups against democratically elected governments, power takeovers orchestrated by mercenaries, armed rebels and dissident groups replacing democratically elected governments, and incumbent governments that refuse to voluntarily give up power following electoral defeat (OAU 2000).

Moreover, the Lomé Declaration laid out two sets of measures the OAU's Central Organ was to take in the event of UCG. The first step involved condemnation of the act, suspension from participating in substantive decision-making in the OAU, and a six-month deadline for the perpetrators to "restore constitutional order" (OAU 2000). During this six-month interregnum, the Secretariat General was urged to use diplomatic pressure and collaborate with other member states and regional bodies to facilitate a return to constitutional rule. The second step was an escalation of the situation in the event of no progress having been made to restore the rule of law. Alongside the initial suspension, targeted sanctions were to be deployed that included visa restrictions, limited diplomatic contacts, and trade embargoes. The declaration called on the OAU Secretariat to coordinate its sanctions regime with member states, regional organizations, and other international actors.

Emerging at the twilight of the OAU, the Lomé Declaration has continued to inform the AU's approach to UCG. The Constitutive Act of AU of 2002 and the protocol establishing the AU's Peace and Security Council (PSC) reaffirmed the Lomé Declaration as the new organization's guide to dealing with UCG. Moreover, these two treaties condemned and rejected UCG, required governments that acquired power illegally to be suspended, and reiterated the use of sanctions against unconstitutional governments, in line with the Lomé Declaration.

Following its establishment, the AU further consolidated its UCG policy in several agreements during its initial years. The 2007 African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (Addis Ababa Charter) that entered into force in 2012 makes several amendments to the Lomé Declaration (Addis Ababa 2007). First, it added to the list of UCG "[a]ny amendment or revision of the constitution or legal instruments, which is an infringement on the principles of democratic change of government." Second, it authorized the AU' PSC to respond to situations involving unconstitutional changes in the government. Third, Article 25 of the Addis Ababa Charter lists sanctions and additional restrictions against perpetrators of illegal power seizures including barring them from participating in "elections held to restore democratic order" (Addis Ababa 2007).

Assessing the AU's UCG policy

Applications of the AU's UCG policy have been mixed, depending on the type of UCG. Tieku (2009) observed that the AU has had more success dealing with coups than cases of democratic backsliding. In fact, several empirical assessments of the impact of the AU's UCG policy on coups attest to the policy's relative success. Evaluations of coup trends in Africa find that the AU's approach has contributed to a decline in the number of attempts (Omorogbe 2011; Souaré 2014; Powell, Lasley, and Schiel 2016). These assessments attribute the AU's adherence to its UCG policy through denying recognition to coup-born regimes and the use of sanctions as having played a role in motivating fewer coup attempts since the AU's establishment. Witt (2012) concludes, following an assessment of the AU's policy on coups that despite some challenges the AU has faced in coordinating with regional economic communities when dealing with coups, "one can observe a trend towards institutionalization and professionalization in the reactions to coups d'état."

A closer inspection of several recent coup cases, however, reveals inconsistencies and challenges with the application of the AU's UCG policy. The AU has at times refrained from labeling certain UCG events "coups" despite them having all the characteristics of an overthrow of a legitimate government and thus necessitating a response according to the Addis Ababa Charter. Additionally, in some cases, the AU has not fully implemented its position on coups by turning a blind eye on coup perpetrators competing and winning postcoup elections. Finally, in those cases that can technically be considered attempted self-coups, where incumbents seek to extend their rule despite having lost elections, the AU has been surprisingly less forceful,

letting other actors take the lead. In the proceeding paragraphs, I discuss these three inconsistencies using the cases of "forced resignations" of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi's legitimation of his coup against Mohammed Morsi in Egypt, and the refusals of Laurent Gbagbo and Yahya Jammeh to accept electoral defeats.

On February 11, 2011, Hosni Mubarak was forced to resign following mass protests. Despite having the hallmarks of a coup, the military had in fact forced Mubarak to resign and the AU did not condemn nor apply measures articulated in its UCG policy. Instead, the PSC's communique of February 16, 2011, noted that it supported the Egyptian people's desire for democracy that was in line with the AU, acknowledged Mubarak's resignation and transfer of power to the armed forces, noted the armed forces' plan to hold free and fair elections within six months, and confirmed that the AU Commission and the PSC will be monitoring the situation (PSC 2011). The AU's UCG policy was hardly applied in this case, an approach that would be repeated in 2017 following Robert Mugabe's ouster in Zimbabwe.

In other coup cases, the AU did not fully apply its UCG policy by remaining silent on postcoup political transitions that legitimized the coup plotters. Mohammed Morsi was "forced" to resign by the Egyptian army led by Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi on July 3, 2013 (Hellquist 2020). This time, the AU initiated its UCG policy by acknowledging that a coup had taken place and suspending Egypt from the AU and calling for a return to civilian rule. The AU nonetheless accepted Al-Sisi as president following his victory in the 2014 elections and lifted Egypt's suspension (PSC 2013, 2014). Yet, by readmitting Egypt and accepting Al-Sisi's election, the AU had gone against its policy of disqualifying coup plotters from competing in elections aimed to restore constitutional rule.

Beyond coups, the AU's UCG policy identifies refusals to accept electoral defeats as constituting a form of UCG that the AU would not condone. These are maneuvers that resemble self-coups. Two recent cases, Cote d'Ivoire in 2010 and the Gambia in 2016, received an AU response. Yet, while the AU did recognize these episodes in line with its UCG policy, it nonetheless let other actors play a more significant role in their resolution. In fact, the AU's approach in both cases of seeking a negotiated political solution failed to resolve the impasse. Instead, as will be discussed, it was the threat and use of force that ultimately got the two incumbents to accept electoral defeat.

Following run-off presidential elections in Cote d'Ivoire on November 28, 2010, Cote d'Ivoire's electoral commission proclaimed opposition candidate Alassane Ouattara the winner. Despite this result being endorsed by several international observer missions including the AU, incumbent president, Laurent Gbagbo, refused to resign and instead had the Constitutional Council made up of his allies proclaim him the winner (Wallis 2010). The AU's PSC swiftly released a statement rejecting what seemed to be an attempt "to undermine the electoral process and the will of the people", labeling it a violation of the Addis Ababa Charter (PSC 2010a). The AU's communique later endorsed the Economic Community of West African States' (ECOWAS) recognition of Ouattara as president-elect of Cote d'Ivoire, urged Gbagbo to immediately accept the outcome of the election, suspended Cote d'Ivoire from the AU until Ouattara was able to assume the presidency, and sought to use mediation to resolve the impasse (PSC 2010b).

However, the AU's diplomatic efforts proved futile. The political situation deteriorated as Gbagbo continued to refuse to relinquish power (Apuuli 2012). An armed struggle ensued between forces loyal to Ouattara and loyalists backing Gbagbo. Although a humanitarian crisis was worsening, the AU continued to insist on mediation and a political solution to the impasse in Cote d'Ivoire. It is in this context that ECOWAS called on the UN Security Council to authorize enforcement measures to protect civilians (Lotze 2011). The political impasse was finally resolved after Ouattara's forces had much control of the country and, in concert with UN peacekeepers

and French forces, arrested Gbagbo (Abatan and Spies 2016). While the AU did respond, its approach that favored a negotiated solution turned out to be ineffective, leading other external actors, particularly the UN and France, to play a leading role in resolving the impasse.

A similar challenge to the Cote d'Ivoire crisis was experienced in the Gambia in 2016. In its December 1, 2016 elections, long-time leader Yahya Jammeh surprisingly lost to the opposition candidate Adama Borrow. Although at first conceding, Jammeh later rejected the result and demanded fresh elections (Fick and Pilling 2016). The AU Commission Chairperson immediately released a statement urging Jammeh to "facilitate a peaceful and orderly transition and transfer of power" and calling "the Gambian defense and security forces to remain strictly neutral" (AU 2016). The PSC later reiterated the AU Chairperson's position and also endorsed the efforts of the UN and in seeking a solution to the political impasse in the Gambia (PSC 2016). In the meantime, ECOWAS initiated mediation efforts aimed at facilitating Jammeh's departure from power while also intimating their readiness to use force (Hartmann 2017).

As Jammeh persisted in his refusal to relinquish power, the PSC issued a communique on January 13, 2017, that the AU will cease recognizing Jammeh as president of the Gambia, warned of serious consequences if he continued to worsen the situation, and reiterated its support for ECOWAS's mediation efforts (PSC 2017). With mediation making no progress and Jammeh declaring a state of emergency on January 17, 2017 (Maclean 2017), ECOWAS began amassing troops and gave Jammeh an ultimatum to leave the country or be removed by intervening ECOWAS troops (Ateku 2020). Jammeh finally resigned and left the country on January 20, 2017. Like in the Cote d'Ivoire case, ECOWAS and military force were key to the resolution of this UCG event.

Conclusion

In sum, the AU has sharpened its UCG policy, building on the post-Cold War attempts of the OAU. The policy has been particularly effective in defining what constitutes UCG and outlining several measures the AU is expected to take in case of violations of this policy. While there is evidence to suggest that the policy, through the threat and use of sanctions, has contributed to a decline in coups d'état, a closer inspection reveals inconsistencies and challenges that this essay has identified. Two cases discussed, Egypt in 2011 and Zimbabwe in 2017, suggest that the AU has at times refused to use the "coup" label despite such UCG events fitting the definition outlined in its policy. While it could be argued that the AU's definition challenge was due to the two events having popular support, recent coups in Sudan in 2019 and Mali in 2020, both of which swiftly faced AU suspensions and sanctions, undermine this hypothesis.

Additionally, the AU's UCG policy's inconsistencies can be observed in cases of incumbents' attempts and extending their rule by refusing to accept electoral defeat, the type of UCG that resembles the January 2021 storming of the US Capitol. In the two cases examined in this essay, Cote d'Ivoire and the Gambia, the AU was less forceful and instead played a complementary role to the efforts of other actors. This is unfortunate, especially because such attempts at extending one's rule unconstitutionally have motivated coup attempts and civil conflict in several countries including Niger in 2010 and Burkina Faso in 2014. This lackluster response along with the inconsistencies of defining and responding to coups points at the AU's UCG policy being a work in progress, albeit an improvement from the nonexistent policy of the OAU.

International organizations can contribute to clarifying what constitutes UCG and, more importantly, outlining strategies member states can take to respond to such events. Yet, the inconsistencies regarding the application of the AU's UCG

policy highlighted in this essay along with other contemporary examples of international organizations' cautious approach to coups, for instance, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' response to the February 2021 coup in Myanmar, suggest that multilateral definitions and responses have not necessarily settled the debate on what counts as an unconstitutional change of government. Yet, such multilateral responses, however inconsistent, enable us to observe some gradual convergence on how states classify these illegal power seizures.

Coup, Self-Coup, Insurrection, or Riot? Reflections on the Stakes of Debates Over What to Call Trump's Efforts to Remain in Power

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The contributions to this forum have highlighted distinctions between the definitions of coups used in academic work and by the general public, politicians, and international organizations, as well as the challenges of correctly classifying Donald Trump's efforts to remain in power. This essay reflects upon the stakes of definitional debates.

There are analytical, normative, and practical implications to classifying an event as a coup. I argue that we have an obligation to try, to the best of our ability, to get it right—not to stretch concepts about which there is a broad scholarly consensus on their meaning to fit new circumstances. Doing so undermines our ability to draw upon scholarship to shed light on the dynamics of current events. At the same time, it is important to recognize that weighing in on definitional debates may be interpreted as taking a normative stance on the relative severity of the event, even if it is not intended that way.

The debate about Trump's efforts to remain in power illustrates some gaps in our understanding of what might be called "coup-adjacent" events—those that share some features of coups but that have distinct perpetrators, targets, or tactics. This essay concludes with suggestions to address these gaps and identifies ways that scholars can productively contribute to public debates in the midst of continuous political events.

What Are the Stakes of Debates Over Terminology?

An accurate assessment of whether a coup is occurring matters because the tactics that work to prevent coups are different from those needed to address other types of antidemocratic actions. This is a central reason that some scholars, myself included, have argued that it matters how we classify events such as the invasion of the US Capitol and Trump's broader effort to remain in power after losing the November 2020 election (e.g., De Bruin 2020b; Ritter and Davenport 2021; Singh 2021). As Smith and Borba's contribution to this forum highlights, citizens use the term coup in a broad range of circumstances, including "illegitimate" impeachments and efforts by incumbents to interfere with the electoral process.

Yet, what scholars know about coups—what causes them, how they unfold, what their consequences will be, and how to prevent them—is based on research that defines coup attempts more narrowly. As Powell and Ben Hammou describe, while scholarly usage of the term "coup" has evolved over time, there is a broad consensus that coups involve a particular set of perpetrators (that come from within the state

apparatus), targets (the sitting executive), and tactics (illegal, overt, and including the use or threat of force). Whether coups succeed or fail depends crucially on how military officers choose to respond (Powell and Thyne 2011; Singh 2014). The same is not necessarily true of illegitimate impeachments or electoral interference.

The causes of coups are also distinct from those of other types of antidemocratic actions. While low levels of development and high inequality can make democracies more vulnerable to both democratic backsliding and coups, other causal factors differ (Waldner and Lust 2018; Brooks 2019). As a result, many of the "coup-proofing" tactics that leaders have adopted to prevent traditional coups cannot defend against other antidemocratic actions. As Marsteintredet and Malamud (2020, 1030) argue in their survey of "coups with adjectives," conflating coup attempts with other processes "is likely to mislead causal analysis and policy prescription since when the diagnosis changes, so should the therapy."

Terms such as "coup," "riot," and "insurrection" also carry with them normative connotations—even where scholars may not intend them to. In a series of survey experiments on support for coups in Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria, for instance, Grewal and Kinney (2021) find evidence of a "coup taboo," or popular stigma about the word "coup": respondents were significantly less supportive of hypothetical scenarios in which the military removed a president from power when such actions were explicitly labeled a "coup" than when they were not.

As a result, even when scholars take pains to emphasize that other types of antidemocratic actions are just as dangerous to democracy, classifying an action as "not a coup" may be interpreted as downplaying the situation. In the case of January 6, this particular concern may be somewhat overblown: a Washington Post-ABC poll found that only 8 percent of respondents supported "the actions of people who stormed the U.S. Capitol last week to protest Biden's election as president," even though the majority of media outlets and commentators refrained from using the word "coup" to describe it (Clement, Guskin, and Baltz 2021). However, labeling may have more of an effect where public opposition is not already so widespread. When scholars respond to media requests or write pieces of public scholarship weighing in on whether an event can be classified as a coup, they are helping shape popular understandings—and thus normative judgements—about what occurred.

There are also practical consequences to correctly classifying antidemocratic actions (Marsteintredet and Malamud 2020). Regional organizations, including the OAS and AU, sanction members that have experienced coups. As Chacha's essay emphasizes, the AU has identified a broader range of anti-democratic actions beyond coups as problematic but, in practice, has not responded to them in the same way it has responded to coups. The United States also restricts foreign assistance to countries following coups but not other forms of interference with democratic processes (Arieff, Lawson, and Chesser 2020). In short, there are analytic, normative, and practical implications of correctly classifying contentious events—all of which are important for scholars to keep in mind when weighing in on definitional debates.

Moving Scholarship on Coups and Other Antidemocratic Actions Forward

The debates over what to call the attack on the US Capitol and Trump's broader efforts to remain in power have highlighted the need to better map the conceptual terrain of antidemocratic actions outside of coups. Smith and Borba suggest one promising way forward. They present a typology that distinguishes forms of interference in democratic sovereignty along two dimensions: whether the goal is executive removal or perpetration and whether the actions taken are overtly unconstitutional or not. Another dimension to consider is whether the action involves the threat of violence. While most coup attempts do not involve bloodshed, the threat of violence has traditionally been a central component distinguishing coups from other

transfers of executive power (De Bruin 2019). Violence may also have implications for public perceptions of the event and the likelihood that it succeeds.

A crucial step for future research involves subjecting other forms of antidemocratic actions to more rigorous conceptualization—a prerequisite for theorizing about their causes and consequences. Even self-coups are currently defined in much more ambiguous ways than traditional coups. Marsteintredet and Malamud (2020, 1026), for instance, describe self-coups as "walking up the ladder of abstraction," by changing the target of the coup from the head of government to other state institutions, while keeping the perpetrators and means the same. Yet, the perpetrator in a self-coup is not any state actor but a specific person—the sitting executive. The tactics used need not be illegal; rulers staging self-coups typically take advantage of legal and quasi-legal maneuvering to grant themselves more authority without violating the law (Cameron 1998). What it means to target a legislature or judiciary is also opaque. Must the executive use force to physically close or capture these institutions? Replace individual legislators or judges? Or does using force to attempt pressure legislators to vote in a particular way—as the rioters at the US Capitol did on January 6—also count? Working out the answers to these questions is crucial in enabling us to draw lessons from comparative cases.

More broadly, this debate illustrates the need for scholars of coups and democratic backsliding to be less siloed in their research. In their review of scholarship on democratic backsliding, Waldner and Lust (2018, 95) specifically note that they understand it as "occurring through a discontinuous series of incremental actions, not a one-time *coup de grace*." Yet because the steps that rulers take to prolong their time in office risk provoking public resistance, support from the military and other security forces often plays an important role in facilitating democratic backsliding as well. Harkness (2017, 802) has shown that "leaders who can count on the aid of a coethnic army are both more likely to challenge term limits and more successful in so doing." At the same time, as Kinney's contribution emphasizes, civilians often play a more important role in opening the door to coups than is typically recognized—whether by engaging in overt coup advocacy or subtler efforts to politicize the military. More engagement between scholars of civil–military relations and democratic backsliding might further clarify the role of civilians in traditional coups—and of militaries in other types of antidemocratic actions—in ways that deepen our understanding of both.

Conclusion

During contentious political events, there will continue to be demand for scholars to categorize and explain different forms of political violence. What scholars can contribute in these moments is, by necessity, "self-consciously impressionistic," as we attempt to combine our "(currently messy) knowledge of the literature, theory and concepts in creative and critical ways" (Wood 2020, 255). We have an obligation to convey nuance and uncertainty where it exists and to recognize the normative connotations associated with the terms we use. At the same time, drawing appropriate lessons from the existing scholarship requires us to be precise about how we are defining and categorizing events—and not to stretch terms about which there is a broad scholarly consensus to fit the news of the day. The essays in this forum represent a first step.

Supplemental Information

Supplemental information can be found at ISA Online.

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