

Political Leadership Survival in the Aftermath of Coups or Overstays: From Illegitimate Ascent to Unexpected Exit

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Abstract

Previous research predominantly focused on the disruption of regular leadership tenures by unexpected events, such as coups, self-coups, uprisings, rebellions, civil wars, or revolutions. In contrast, this study aims to delve into the longevity of leaders who ascend to power through these very unexpected events, specifically coups or overstays. The central argument posits that the endurance of political leadership is influenced not only by their actions and policies in office but also by the means through which they come to power. Employing a survival model, this research investigates the disparities in survival rates between leaders who rise to power via coups and those who overstay their terms, and seeks to elucidate the underlying reasons for these differences.

Keywords: Political survival, Coups, Overstays

1 Introduction

The question of why some leaders maintain their hold on power for extended periods, spanning decades, while others witness their leadership cut short after mere years, months, or even days, has captivated scholars and researchers in the field of political science. This inquiry has been extensively explored in numerous works, as evidenced by notable contributions such as those by [Clinton \(1975\)](#) and [Bueno de Mesquita et al. \(2003\)](#).

In their seminal work, Bueno de Mesquita and his colleagues undertake a comprehensive examination of leaders across a diverse political landscape, encompassing democracies and autocracies, parliamentary and presidential systems, and both civilian and military contexts. However, it is worth noting that a significant number of political leaders, especially in democratic countries, adhere to regular and predictable tenures. An illustrative example can be found in the United States, where presidents may serve up to eight years if they secure a second term, even in cases of suboptimal performance. Similarly, in autocratic Mexico from 1919 to 2000, each president served a fixed six-year term without facing overthrows or overstays. In such contexts, the investigation of tenure length is of marginal significance, as power transitions between leaders typically occur within the established framework of constitutional rules or unwritten conventions.

Given the distinctive nature of political leader survival in different regimes, scholars have increasingly focused on the unexpected tenures, namely those leaders who do not complete their original terms or those who overstay their mandates. This shift in focus stems from the fact that some leaders are toppled by coups, uprisings, rebellions, civil wars, or revolutions, while others successfully navigate lawful or unlawful challenges. Previous research on the longevity of political leaders predominantly centers on two primary dimensions. The first dimension encompasses the contextual conditions and resources available to leaders, including factors such as their personal competence ([Yu & Jong-A-Pin 2016](#)), the stability of their society ([Arriola 2009](#)), economic performance ([Palmer & Whitten 1999](#), [Williams \(2011\)](#)), access to natural resources ([Smith 2004](#), [Quiroz Flores & Smith 2012](#)), and external support networks ([Licht 2009](#), [Wright 2008](#), [Thyne et al. \(2017\)](#)). The second dimension delves into the strategies employed by leaders in enacting their political and economic policies ([Gandhi & Przeworski 2007](#), [Morrison 2009](#)), as well as

their responses to challenges and dissent within their regimes (Escribà-Folch 2013, Davenport et al. 2021).

Unsurprisingly, a substantial portion of the existing research on political survival predominantly centers on coups, as they represent the most common pathways to the exit of authoritarian leaders (Svolik 2008, Frantz & Stein 2016). Previous literature has primarily delved into the survival of leadership in terms of strategies aimed at preventing coups (Powell 2017, Sudduth 2017, De Bruin 2020), or how leaders can extend their tenures after surviving failed coup attempts (Easton & Siverson 2018).

However, on one hand, the duration of political leaders' tenures can be significantly influenced by unforeseen events like coups. On the other hand, these very unexpected events that usher in new leaders can also become the catalyst for the subsequent cycle of unexpected developments. It is conceivable that leaders who come to power through regular and constitutional transitions are more likely to undergo periodic shifts in leadership, while those who seize power through unconstitutional means face a higher risk of unanticipated removal from office. Unfortunately, there has been a limited emphasis on the study of leadership survival in the context of successful coups. A similar research gap exists in the examination of incumbents who overstay their terms in power, which forms the central focus of this paper.

The analysis of their tenures holds particular significance for two reasons. Firstly, the duration of these leaders' tenures exhibits considerable variation, ranging from mere months to several decades. Secondly, predicting the tenures of such leaders proves challenging. A seemingly robust and stable regime can collapse suddenly overnight, while an apparently fragile one might persist for decades. The substantial disparities in these tenures remain inadequately explained, posing a perplexing challenge that has piqued the interest of numerous political scientists.

Expanding on the discourse surrounding coups and leaders who overstay their intended terms, this paper delves into the trajectories of political leaders who came to power through coups or extended their mandates beyond the originally intended tenure. The central objective is to examine the variations in survival duration between leaders who attain power through coups and those who exceed their terms, while also shedding light on the underlying factors contributing to these

distinctions.

This paper follows a structured approach as outlined below: The second section encompasses a comprehensive literature review on political survival and highlighting the contributions of this paper might offer. The third chapter delves into the examination of factors influencing the survival of leaders who have ascended to power through unconstitutional means. Chapter 4 provides an account of the methodology and data employed, utilizing a survival model for a comprehensive analysis of the determinants of leaders' survival. The subsequent chapter, Chapter 5, presents the findings of this analysis, facilitating an in-depth discussion of the results. Finally, in Chapter 6, the paper concludes by synthesizing these findings and exploring their broader implications.

2 The dynamics of leadership survival in different scenarios

In their ambitious work, [Bueno de Mesquita et al. \(2003\)](#) set out to provide a comprehensive explanation for the logic of political leadership survival within a universal framework. According to this framework, the endurance of political leaders hinges on the maintenance of a supportive winning coalition. However, it is essential to notice that the dynamics of leadership survival differ significantly across various types of regimes.

In democratic systems, distinctions emerge between parliamentary and presidential regimes. For instance, in parliamentary countries such as the UK and Japan, political parties may maintain power for extended periods, even as prime ministers change frequently. A contemporary example is the United Kingdom in 2022, which saw three different prime ministers while the Conservative Party retained its grip on power. In contrast, in presidential countries like the United States, leaders are subject to fixed terms, making power transitions more regular and predictable.

Moreover, the concept of dividing the electorate into a selectorate and a winning coalition may not be as relevant in democracies. While those who support and vote for incumbents may witness their preferred policies enacted, those who vote against them still experience the same policies. For instance, individuals who cast their votes for candidates advocating lower taxes face the same tax rates as those who vote against the incumbents. This doesn't result in lower

taxes for supporters and higher taxes for opponents; rather, both groups encounter identical tax levels. Consequently, it becomes challenging to argue that winning coalitions inherently gain a significant advantage over the broader electorate in democratic systems.

On the other hand, there are types of autocratic regimes, each with its distinct characteristics, including civilian autocracy, personnel autocracy, military regimes, party dominance, and monarchies. In most autocratic regimes, the process of leadership selection remains veiled in secrecy. For instance, in countries like China, the mechanisms for appointing leaders often resemble a black box, concealing the rules and procedures from outsiders. Expressing dissenting views, whether as potential challengers or supporters of challengers, can be perilous. In Russia, despite the presence of general elections, challengers frequently face severe consequences such as assassination, poisoning, imprisonment, or exile. As a result of the absence of transparent and fair conventional procedures for power transitions, leaders in autocratic regimes are more vulnerable to being deposed through coups or other unconventional means.

3 Theories

The survival of political leaders following coups or overstay may hinge on six pivotal factors:

3.1 Coups vs. overstay

Survival in power relies significantly on the cohesion of the ruling group. As numerous scholars have pointed out, internal conflicts among elites pose a more serious threat to the stability of those in power. Coups often lay bare the fractures within a regime, not only attracting more followers to orchestrate new coups but also emboldening external challengers, including uprisings, revolutions, and civil wars. On the other hand, successful tenures unmistakably showcase the incumbents' firm grasp on power, discouraging both internal dissent and external threats ([Dahl & Gleditsch 2023](#)).

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Political leaders who successfully extend their time in power are more likely to have prolonged survival compared to leaders who assume power through coups.

3.2 Regime types

In the majority of cases, regimes following coups or prolonged stays tend to be non-democratic. Democratic leaders are generally anticipated to relinquish power in a regular and cyclical manner. Conversely, for non-democratic leaders, the duration of their tenures is heavily influenced by the type of autocracy. The three primary autocratic regimes are dominant party, military, and personal.

Within the military regime, leaders often encounter more challenges during their tenures. The ability to challenge incumbents, particularly those within ruling groups, relies significantly on the support of military forces. In dominant party or personal regimes, the military typically operates under the control of party or personal leaders, who are the incumbents themselves. Unlike military regimes, where generals often play significant roles in politics, there are typically many generals in dominant party or personal regimes, acting as checks and balances on each other. Military regimes, however, with their powerful army leaders and more influential generals, are more prone to political interference and internal conflicts, leading to shorter tenures for leaders in such regimes.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Leaders in dominant party or personal regimes are expected to have longer survival periods than those in military regimes.

3.3 Societal stability

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Political leaders presiding over stable societies are likely to experience longer tenures.

3.4 Purges and repressions

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Leaders who are more prone to employ stringent repression against dissidents are expected to have longer survival durations.

3.5 External alliances

Hypothesis 5 (H5): Leaders with strong external alliances are anticipated to have extended survival periods.

3.6 Economic performance

Hypothesis 6 (H6): Leaders with a robust economic performance are likely to endure longer than their counterparts facing economic crises.

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