

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 Literature review

The duration for which political leaders can maintain their hold on power is, to a significant extent, influenced by the manner in which they ascended to leadership positions. It's conceivable that leaders who engage in regular and constitutional transitions of power are more likely to voluntarily step down as their terms expire, while those who came to power through unconstitutional means are at a higher risk of being unexpectedly removed from office. Much of the existing research on the relationship between coups and the survival of leadership primarily focuses on strategies to prevent coups ([Powell 2017](#), [Sudduth 2017](#), [De Bruin 2020](#)) or how leaders can prolong their stay in power after surviving failed coup attempts ([Easton & Siverson 2018](#)). Unfortunately, there is a limited emphasis on the study of leadership survival in the context of successful coups. A similar gap in research attention exists concerning incumbents who overstay their terms in power.

In their seminal work, [Bueno de Mesquita et al. \(2003\)](#) introduce and expound upon the selectorate theory of politics. This theory centers on the analysis of leadership survival based on the concept of a sufficiently large winning coalition (W) within the selectorate (S). The selectorate, which encompasses individuals with the authority to determine leadership, contrasts with the winning coalition, signifying the minimum number of selectorate members required to secure power. In this framework, the endurance of political leaders depends on the maintenance of a supportive

winning coalition. Winning coalitions, driven by the pursuit of benefits, opt to back incumbents, but their allegiance may shift towards challengers if they anticipate greater advantages from a change in leadership.

However, two critical issues arise within this framework. Firstly, in democracies, while those who support and vote for incumbents may see their preferred policies enacted, those who vote against them still face the same policies. For example, individuals casting their votes for a candidate in favor of lower taxes confront the same tax rates as those who vote against the incumbents. This doesn't translate into lower taxes for supporters and higher taxes for opponents; rather, both groups face identical tax levels. Consequently, we cannot assert that winning coalitions inherently gain a significant advantage over the broader electorate. Secondly, in many autocratic regimes, the process of leadership selection remains shrouded in secrecy. In countries like China, the mechanisms for appointing leaders resemble a black box, with outsiders left unaware of the rules and procedures. Expressing dissenting views, whether as potential challengers or supporters of challengers, is fraught with danger. In Russia, despite the presence of general elections, challengers often face perilous consequences, including assassination, poisoning, imprisonment, or exile.

3 Theories

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

3.1 Coups vs. overthrows

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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