

Jonathan Powell

[CV](#)[Publications](#)[Global Instances of Coups](#)[Mutiny in Africa](#)[Blog](#)

Why we don't call January 6 "a coup"

Published by Jonathan Powell on September 6, 2023

Investigations related to criminal cases at both the state and federal levels have continued to reveal important details about a conspiracy to undermine the results of the 2020 American presidential election. While the justice system and wider public continues to grapple with the assault on American democracy, we have also seen a debate as to how to describe the events of January 6, 2021.

Revealingly, the Select Committee tasked with investigating January 6 merely refers to the "attack," intentionally avoiding a specific label. Initial media coverage regularly referred to the event as an insurrection. Others, of course, labeled the event as an attempted coup. The latter prompted a debate among scholars, with many—though condemning the illegal nature of the act—refused to call the event "a coup."

Professor Paul Poast recently lamented this reluctance, claiming failure to call the event a coup "flies in the face of what political scientists know about coups." His comments carry two primary implications. First, he argues the events of January 6 clearly fall in line with the defining traits

political scientists use to label coups. Second, reluctance to call it "a coup" is due to an "American bias" in which the United States is frequently given "the benefit of the doubt."

While both of these claims seem reasonable on the surface, neither holds up to close scrutiny. More importantly, fixation on labeling the event a coup could actually be counterproductive.

First, laypeople and politicians might have different motives for choosing or avoiding the term. An unwillingness to impose the coup label from social scientists, however, is not due to giving the United States "the benefit of the doubt." It is due to reasoned efforts to be accurate, consistent, and to avoid applying lessons learned from events that are fundamentally different from January 6.

Poast points to three important traits of coups that have been consistently described by scholars: the involvement of a regime insider, the common (but not required) involvement of the Armed Forces, and the need for the event to have been planned in advance. While these are common to definitions of coups, Poast notably omits reference to arguably the most important element of contemporary definitions of what a coup is: coups target the *incumbent*.

The need for the current incumbent to be targeted is required by virtually any modern approach to studying coups. Various academic efforts to define coups have required the target of the act to be "the *incumbent* ruling regime or regime leader," "the *sitting* executive," "the *incumbent* executive authority," "existing regimes," etc., while *Merriam-Webster* describes the "violent overthrow or alteration of an *existing* government."

In short, for a coup attempt to have occurred on January 6, 2021 in the United States, the target would have to have been the *incumbent* president—Donald Trump—and not a presumed successor. Trump's plan was not to "involve the military in securing an extraconstitutional change in leadership." The plan was the extraconstitutional *maintenance* of leadership.

This is not simply a semantic distinction. The very reason why these definitions use specific criteria is to avoid conflating different political phenomena. These are different acts that can be undertaken by or visited upon different actors, have distinct motives, and use different tactics, even if the broader goal of gaining or retaining power is similar. More importantly, the remedy to this issues could be wholly different.

Second, the question "what if this had happened in another country?" does not have to be a hypothetical scenario. Many have in fact investigated events in which incumbents have attempted to retain power by illegally ignoring, changing, or annulling unfavorable election outcomes. These previous investigations provide a specific answer to the "what if" question: **similar events have occurred in other countries, and those events were not called coups.**

Yahya Jammeh's effort to ignore his December 2016 electoral loss is not considered a coup. Laurent Gbagbo's effort to undermine the outcome of the 2010 presidential election in Côte d'Ivoire was similarly spared widespread use of the label. The same goes for more recent—though under the radar—events in places such as Samoa.

One could even make a case that bias has actually gone in the other direction. In other words, January 6 has specifically earned so much attention and so much desire to apply the coup label because it is the United States. The Center for Systemic Peace is exceptional among contemporary coup projects by including January 6 as an attempted coup. A careful review of their coup list reveals that it is completely devoid of the many similar cases of incumbent attempts to illegally retain power after election losses. Attempts by leaders such as Jammeh and Gbagbo, or leaders undertaken in any country other than the United States, are conspicuously absent.

And while the event has been commonly referred to as a self-coup, the Center for Systemic Peace notes that self-coups are "not considered coup events." The inclusion of January 6 on this list appears to be truly

exceptional. Had the events of January 6 occurred elsewhere, precedent in the project suggests it would actually not have been included.

Third, Poast is correct that the event illustrates the potential fragility of American political institutions and our politicians and society certainly need to take threats to political institutions more seriously. However, labeling the event a coup gets us no closer. From a legal standpoint, there is no constitutional language or legal statutes that would suddenly become relevant. To the contrary, relying on "coup" to describe the event could actually move us away from labels that carry specific legal implications.

From an academic standpoint, any lessons learned from literature on strengthening institutions against coups is derived from research on events that are fundamentally different from January 6. In fact, the very nature of "coup-proofing" strategies is to strengthen the incumbent relative to potential challengers, often with little regard for adverse consequences. Efforts to avoid another January 6 should learn from actions undertaken by incumbents, not actions aimed at removing them.

Leave a Reply

Next Post

[Coups, norms, and the fates of leaders](#)