

Autocoups: Conceptual Clarification and Analysis of Power Extensions by Incumbent Leaders

Zhu Qi
University of Essex
qz21485@essex.ac.uk

2024-06-14

Abstract

This study aims to clarify the concept of autocoups, specifically focusing on power extensions by incumbent leaders. By distinguishing autocoups from the broader and more ambiguous concepts of self-coups or executive takeover, which encompass both executive power aggrandizement and power extension, this research redefines the concept of autocoups. Based on this refined definition, we introduce a novel dataset of autocoup events from 1945 to 2022.

Using the newly compiled dataset, the research includes three types of case studies that provide qualitative insights into the dynamics of autocoups. Additionally, an empirical analysis on the determinants of autocoup attempts and success is offered to demonstrate how the autocoup dataset can be employed for more quantitative research.

This study contributes to the existing literature by providing a clearer conceptual framework and a novel dataset of autocoups. It enhances our understanding of the mechanisms and motivations behind power extensions by incumbent leaders and examines the implications for democratic backsliding, democratic breakdown, personalization, and autocratic deterioration. The insights gained from this study could draw more attention to the effects of autocoups on power transitions, political stability, and democratic resilience.

Keywords: Coups, Autocoups, Political Leadership

1 Introduction

The study of irregular power transitions, encompassing both irregular entries and exits from office, has long been a central topic in political science. However, one form of irregular power transition - the incumbent leader's refusal to relinquish power - remains relatively understudied. This scenario, where leaders overstay their mandated term limits for one or more terms, or even indefinitely, lacks a universally accepted term in the existing literature. To address this gap, this study adopts the term "autocoup" to denote this phenomenon.

Coups, being the primary form of irregular power transitions, have received significant scholarly attention. Research by Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza (2009) indicate that coups account for a substantial portion of such transitions, with roughly two-thirds (65.8%) of 374 irregular exits occurring through coups. Additionally, Frantz and Stein (2016) demonstrate that coups are the most common form of exit in autocracies, surpassing regular transitions by a third.

However, while coups were once frequent, recent decades have witnessed a decline in their occurrence (Bermeo 2016; Thyne and Powell 2019). Conversely, autocoups appear to be on the rise, particularly since the Cold War's end (Ginsburg, Melton, and Elkins 2010; Baturo 2014; Versteeg et al. 2020). Despite the significant political impact and rising prevalence of autocoups, their study lags behind that of classical coups, which are extensively documented due to their historical frequency (Thyne and Powell 2019).

This research aims to bridge this gap by focusing on the understudied phenomenon of autocoups as they are at least equally important and warrant comprehensive analysis. Firstly, autocoups are typically accompanied by a disregard for the rule of law, weakened institutions, and potential democratic backsliding or authoritarian personalization. Secondly, like traditional coups, successful autocoups increase the risk of future irregular power transitions. Research indicates that since 1945, approximately 62 percent of leaders who overstayed their term limits through autocoups in non-democratic countries were either ousted or assassinated while in office (Baturo 2019). Thirdly, failed autocoups often trigger instability that fuels protests, violence, and even civil wars.

Despite their significance, autocoups are understudied compared to traditional coups. Although

several relevant concepts and terminologies such as self-coups, autoups, autogolpes, incumbent takeovers, executive aggrandizement, overstay, and continuismo have been proposed and discussed (Marsteintredet and Malamud 2019; Baturo and Tolstrup 2022), there is no clear and widely accepted term to describe these events. Different terms are often used interchangeably or inconsistently, leading to confusion. Moreover, due to the lack of clear concepts, the collection of autoups datasets is still in its early stages compared to the rich datasets of traditional coups. Hence, the limited existing studies on autoups have primarily relied on case studies (Maxwell A. Cameron 1998b; Antonio 2021; Pion-Berlin, Bruneau, and Goetze 2022), with few focusing on quantitative analyses.

To fully understand irregular political leadership transitions and survival, we need to redefine and clarify the term “autoups” first. Based on a clear definition, we can introduce an autoups dataset that can be used for further empirical analysis. This study aims to address these knowledge gap surrounding autoups and contribute in three areas. First, it clarifies the terminology by defining autoups based mainly on power extension. Second, it introduces a new dataset of autoups since 1945 based on this refined definition. Finally, the research utilizes this dataset for a quantitative analysis of the factors that influence leaders’ decisions to attempt autoups.

The subsequent section, based on a comprehensive review of the definitions of power expansions and power extensions, proposes a precise definition of autoups. This will be followed by an introduction to the new autoups dataset in Part III. In Parts IV and V, I will explain the determinants of autoups attempts through two case studies and demonstrate how the novel autoups dataset collected in this study can be used in empirical analysis. Finally, I will conclude in Part VI, summarizing the key insights gained from the study and suggesting avenues for future research.

2 Autocoups: A literature review and clarification of definitions

Compared to coups, which are clearly defined and widely accepted as illegal attempts by elites within the ruling group to overthrow the leadership ([Powell and Thyne 2011](#)), the concept of autocoups (also known as self-coups or autogolpes) suffers from a lack of consistency and clarity. This ambiguity hinders our understanding and study of a critical phenomenon in irregular power transitions. To address this gap, we need to tackle two key issues: terminology and definition.

2.1 Terminology

The most common term in autocoup literature is self-coup, or autogolpe in Spanish ([Przeworski et al. 2000](#); [Maxwell A. Cameron 1998a](#); [Bermeo 2016](#); [Helmke 2017](#); [Marsteintredet and Malamud 2019](#)). This term gained academic prominence after Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori dissolved Congress, temporarily suspended the constitution, and ruled by decree in 1992 ([Mauceri 1995](#); [Maxwell A. Cameron 1998b](#)). However, as Marsteintredet and Malamud (2019) point out, the term “self-coup” can be misleading, as it implies a coup against oneself, which is inaccurate since it is not self-directed but targets other state institutions or apparatus.

Another approach to describe coups staged by incumbents is to use terms with adjectives or modifiers, such as presidential coup, executive coup, constitutional coup, electoral coup, judicial coup, slow-motion coup, soft coup, and parliamentary coup ([Marsteintredet and Malamud 2019](#)). While these terms can be helpful in specific contexts, their proliferation often adds to the overall confusion rather than providing clarification. Most of these terms focus on the specific methods used by coup perpetrators but fail to clearly identify the perpetrator, necessitating further explanation. In fact, many of these methods could be employed either by or against executive leaders.

A third alternative involves terms like “incumbent takeover” or “overstay”. Incumbent takeover refers to “an event perpetuated by a ruling executive that significantly reduces the formal and/or informal constraints on his/her power” ([Baturu and Tolstrup 2022, 374](#)), based on earlier research

(Svolik 2014). While overstay is defined as “staying longer than the maximum term as it stood when the candidate originally came in office” (Ginsburg, Melton, and Elkins 2011, 1844). These terms identify the perpetrator (the incumbent) and/or the nature of the event (overstaying/extending power). However, they do not highlight the illegality or illegitimacy of these actions. Therefore, they cannot serve as a direct counterpart to “coup,” which clearly denotes the illegality of leadership ousters, while “takeover” or “overstay” diminish the severity.

Therefore, this study strongly advocates for “autocoup” as the most accurate and appropriate term. It avoids the pitfalls of other terms by clearly conveying the essence of the phenomenon as a coup-like power grab and effectively distinguishing autocoups from classical coups by highlighting the perpetrator.

2.2 Definition

While terminology is important, another issue arises with the previous definition of autocoups: should we emphasize power expansion or power extension? Power Expansion refers to situations where an executive branch expands its power beyond its original boundaries, often by encroaching on the authority of other branches like the legislature or judiciary. Power Extension, on the other hand, refers to situations where a leader extends their tenure in office beyond the originally mandated term limits. Existing definitions of self-coup or autocoup sometimes touch upon power extensions, but they primarily focus on power expansions, which has several drawbacks.

Firstly, defining autocoups primarily in terms of power expansion does not align well with the definition of a coup. When we define a classical coup, the focus is clearly on the ouster of the current leader, not merely a limitation or restriction on their power. Using the same logic, a more appropriate definition of an autocoup should prioritize the extension of executive leadership. We would not classify an event as a coup if a vice president seizes some power from the president, as long as the president remains in office. Similarly, an executive leader acquiring more power from other branches should not automatically qualify as an autocoup if their term limits remain unchanged.

Secondly, emphasizing power expansion raises issues regarding the purpose of launching an autocoup. As Maxwell A. Cameron (1998a) defined, a self-coup is “a temporary suspension of the constitution and dissolution of congress by the executive, who rules by decree until new legislative elections and a referendum can be held to ratify a political system with broader executive power” (Maxwell A. Cameron 1998a, 220). However, without extending their time in office, the leader faces significant risks once their term expires, as they could face legal or political repercussions for the autocoup itself, leaving behind an overly powerful executive branch for the successor. Although the term “self-coup” gained prominence from the 1992 Fujimori case in Peru, which initially involved seizing power from other institutions, it is important to note that Fujimori ultimately extended his term limits through constitutional amendments. The 1993 Constitution allowed Fujimori to run for a second term, which he won with popularity in April 1995. Shortly after Fujimori began his second term, his supporters in Congress passed a law of “authentic interpretation” which effectively allowed him to run for another term in 2000, which he won amid suspicions and rumors. However, he did not survive the third term. In 2000, facing charges of corruption and human rights abuses, Fujimori fled Peru and took refuge in Japan (Ezrow 2019).

Thirdly, measuring the extent of power expansion to qualify as an autocoup can be challenging. Power expansion might occur as a sudden, significant event, as seen with Fujimori in 1992, or it could be gradual and incremental, as in the case of Putin since assuming power in 1999 (Chaisty 2019). In the latter case, it is unclear whether each step should be considered an autocoup or if the entire process together should be labelled as such. If the latter, determining the point at which it becomes an autocoup is again problematic.

Therefore, this study argues that a more accurate definition of autocoups should prioritize power extension as the core characteristic.

In light of this discussion, we formally define an autocoup as *the practice of current political leaders extending their time in office beyond their originally mandated term limits*. Three key points need to be highlighted for this definition. Firstly, this definition refers to the actual leaders of the country, regardless of their official titles. Typically, this would be the president; however, in

some cases, such as in Germany, the primary leader is the premier, as the president is a nominal head of state. Secondly, while the primary characteristic of an autoup is extending the term in office, this definition does not exclude instances of power expansion. Both aspects can coexist, but the extension of the term is the central element. Thirdly, autoups, by their nature, subvert legal norms and established power transfer mechanisms. While they may employ seemingly legal tactics, their essence is illegitimacy. This critical aspect will be explored further in Chapter III.

3 Autoup dataset

3.1 Defining the scope

Defining any concept or term inevitably involves borderline cases that are difficult to categorize. In the context of autoups, it is particularly challenging to determine whether a specific instance of overstaying should be coded as an autoup. To avoid ambiguity and dilemmas, we will code all instances of incumbents extending their original mandated term in office as autoups, regardless of whether the extension is patently illegal or superficially legal.

This approach is taken because a truly legitimate amendment to power transition institutions should only apply to subsequent leaders, not the incumbent. If the incumbent changes the rules to their own benefit, the legitimacy of such changes is questionable, even if the amendment procedures appear legal. We have valid reasons to question their motivations since they are the beneficiaries of these reforms.

Even so, some cases remain unclear. For example, consider a two-term limit presidency where the leader wins a second term. Allegations of election rigging might surface, raising suspicions about the fairness of the election results. If such suspicions can be verified with evidence or judicial verdict, the case would undoubtedly be coded as an autoup. However, proving election rigging in countries with powerful executives can be difficult. In such instances, we will not classify it as an autoup unless a formal judicial verdict confirms the rigging.

Even in contexts where leaders lack clear term limits or the constitution allows indefinite terms,

identifying autocoups remains possible. We will discuss and explain this in the next section.

3.2 Classifying autocoups

Autocoups can manifest in various forms. To understand this phenomenon better, we can categorize them based on several key factors:

- **Methods Employed:** This refers to the specific strategies incumbents use to extend their hold on power. Examples include constitution amending or reinterpreting, election cancelling, delaying or rigging.
- **Degree of Legality:** This dimension captures the extent to which an autocoup deviates from established legal norms. It can range from minor rule-bending to outright constitutional violations.
- **Duration of Extension:** This category focuses on the length of time the incumbent leader remains in office beyond their designated term limits. It could be a single additional term, multiple terms, or even a lifetime hold on power.
- **Outcomes:** This factor examines whether the autocoup attempt is successful or ultimately fails.

This study will primarily focus on the **methods** employed by incumbents to stage autocoups. However, we will also code for other relevant aspects like the degree of legality, duration of extension, and outcomes whenever information is available. This multifaceted approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the variations within autocoups.

3.2.1 Evasion of term limits

Evasion of term limits is a common tactic employed in autocoups. Incumbents often resort to seemingly legal maneuvers to extend their hold on power. These maneuvers primarily involve

manipulating constitutional provisions through various means. The incumbents may pressure legislative bodies (congress) or judicial institutions (Supreme Court) to reinterpret existing term limits, amend the constitution to extend terms, or even replace the constitution altogether. This might also involve popular vote through referendums, or a combination of these approaches. The extension can range from a single term to indefinite rule.

These manoeuvres primarily involve manipulating constitutional provisions through various means.

- **Changing Term Length:** Incumbents might lengthen the official term duration (e.g., from 4 to 6 years) to stay in office longer, even if the number of allowed terms remains unchanged. Examples, in the dataset, include Presidents Dacko (CAR, 1962), Kayibanda (Rwanda, 1973), and Pinochet (Chile, 1988).
- **Enabling re-election:** This approach involves incumbents modifying legal or constitutional frameworks to permit themselves to run for leadership again, despite initial restrictions. These restrictions might include prohibitions on re-election, bans on immediate re-election, or term limits that the incumbents have already reached. An illustrative example is President Menem of Argentina in 1993, who leveraged this tactic to extend his tenure.
- **Removing Term Limits Altogether:** This approach, as seen with President Xi Jinping of China in 2018, technically allows the leader to rule for life, although they may still need to participate in elections (a formality in such cases).
- **Leader for Life:** This differs from removing term limits as the leader still faces elections (although potentially rigged or uncontested). An example is Indonesia's President Sukarno, who attempted to declare himself president for life in 1963 (ultimately unsuccessful).

These methods are often used in combination. Initially, the duration of a term is extended, followed by amendments to allow re-election, then the removal of term limits, and finally, the declaration of the leader for life. For example, Haitian President François Duvalier amended the

constitution in 1961 to permit immediate re-election and then declared himself president for life in 1964.

3.2.2 Election Manipulation or Rigging

Election manipulation or rigging is the second most commonly used tactic to extend an incumbent's tenure.

- **Delaying or Removing Elections:** Delaying or removing scheduled elections without legitimate justification is a frequent method used by incumbents to maintain power. For instance, Chadian President François Tombalbaye delayed general elections until 1969 after assuming power in 1960. Similarly, Angolan President José Eduardo dos Santos suspended elections throughout his rule from 1979 to 2017.
- **Refusing Unfavourable Election Results:** Incumbents may refuse to accept unfavourable election results and attempt to overturn them through illegitimate means. For example, President Donald Trump of the United States refused to accept the results of the 2020 election and tried to overturn them.
- **Rigging Elections:** Winning elections with an extraordinarily high percentage of votes is highly questionable. This study will code elections where the incumbent wins more than 90% of the vote as autoucoups. For instance, President Teodoro Obiang of Equatorial Guinea has consistently won elections with over 95% of the vote in multi-party elections since 1996, indicating election rigging.
- **Excluding Opposition in Elections:** Manipulating the electoral process by excluding opposition parties or candidates from participation, effectively creating a one-candidate race, clearly signifies an autoucoup.

3.2.3 Figurehead

To circumvent term limits, some incumbents might choose a close associate to act as a figurehead, taking the office publicly while the incumbent retains real power behind the scenes. This can be achieved through seemingly subordinate positions.

One example is Russia in 2008. Facing term limits, President Putin selected Dmitry Medvedev to run for president. After the election, Medvedev appointed Putin as Prime Minister. However, most analysts believe Putin wielded the true power throughout this period.

3.2.4 Constitutional power transferring

This tactic involves an incumbent leader manipulating the constitution or legal framework to create a new position of power, or elevate an existing one, before stepping down from their current role. They then strategically take on this new position, effectively retaining significant control despite appearing to relinquish power. For example, in 2017, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the Prime Minister of Turkey, spearheaded a constitutional referendum that transitioned the country from a parliamentary system to a presidential one. This new system concentrated significant executive power in the presidency. Following the referendum's approval, Erdoğan successfully ran for the newly established presidency, effectively retaining control under a different title.

3.2.5 One-Time Arrangement for Current Leaders

This strategy involves special arrangements that extend the term or tenure of current leaders without altering the underlying institutions. For example, Lebanon extended President Émile Lahoud's term by three years in 2004 through a one-time arrangement.

3.3 Data Coding

3.3.1 Data sources

Table 1: Sources of coding autocoup dataset

Source	Years	Unit of Research	Observations	Authors
Archigos	1875-2015	Leaders	3409	Hein Goemans, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, Giacomo Chiozza (2009)
PLAD	1989-2023	Leaders	1334	Pietro Bompreszzi et al. (2024)
Incumbent Takeover	1913-2019	Incumbent takeovers	279	Alexander Baturo, Jakob Tolstrup (2022)

The autocoup dataset, like most dataset coding procedures, is based on existing studies and datasets. Table 1 outlines the main sources for coding the autocoup dataset. The Archigos dataset (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009) and the Political Leaders’ Affiliation Database (PLAD) dataset (Bompreszzi et al. 2024) provide comprehensive data on all leaders from 1875 to 2023, although our coding only includes autocoups since 1945. These datasets help identify the actual rulers of countries, saving time in distinguishing real leaders from nominal heads of state.

The Incumbent Takeover dataset (Baturo and Tolstrup 2022), which integrates data from 11 related datasets, offers a broad spectrum of cases where leaders significantly reduce the constraints on their power, encompassing both power expansions and extensions. Since some executive takeovers do not qualify as autocoups due to the lack of term extensions, I cross-referenced the Archigos dataset, which includes detailed trajectories of leaders’ entries and exits from power, to verify the qualifications for autocoups.

In total, I coded 110 observations, with 72 overlapping with the candidate data from Incumbent Takeover. The remaining 38 events were newly coded by the author through verification with other sources such as Archigos, and news reports. The main deviation from the Incumbent Takeover dataset arises from excluding power expansions that do not involve attempts to extend tenure.

3.3.2 Definitions of main variables

This section describes the variables included in the autocoup dataset.

- **Country Identification:**

- `ccode` and `country`: These variables come from the Correlates of War project ([Stinnett et al. 2002](#)) and identify the countries included in the dataset, which are widely used in political science datasets, ensuring consistency and compatibility across different studies and datasets.

- **Leader Information:**

- `leader_name`: This variable follows the Archigos dataset's coding and records the name of the de facto leader who wielded power in the country.

- **Timeline Variables:**

- `entry_date`: Captures the date the leader assumed power.
- `exit_date`: Records the date the leader left office.
- `autocoup_date`: Indicates the date the autocoup is considered to have occurred. Since extensions often happen incrementally, this date reflects a significant event marking the extension, such as a legislative vote or successful referendum.
- `extending_date`: Represents the start date of the leader's additional term acquired through the autocoup.

The `entry_date` and `exit_date` come from the Archigos and REIGN datasets, while the other two dates are coded by the dataset creator.

- **Power Transition Methods:**

- `entry_method` and `exit_method`: These categorical variables record how the leader entered and exited power (e.g., election, coup d'état, death).
- `entry_regular` and `exit_regular`: These dummy variables indicate whether the entry and exit methods were regular (e.g., election) or irregular (e.g., coup).

- **Autocoup Details:**

- `autocoup_method`: This key variable captures the various methods leaders use to extend their stay in power (see Section 3.2 for details).
- `autocoup_outcome`: This variable indicates the outcome of the autocoup attempt: “fail and lose power”, “fail but complete original tenure”, or “successful”. For successful coups, the additional term length can be calculated from the difference between `exit_date` and `extending_date`.

- **Data Source:**

- `source`: This variable identifies the dataset source used for coding, primarily differentiating among “Incumbent Takeovers” or other sources.

- **Additional Notes:**

- `notes`: This variable provides context for exceptional cases. For instance, if a leader undertook multiple autocoup attempts, details are recorded here.

The dataset encompasses a total of 14 variables along with the `notes` field.

3.4 Data descriptions

Table 2: Autocoup methods and success rates (1945-2021)

Autocoup Method	Autocoup Attempted	Autocoup Succeeded	Success Rate
Enabling re-election	46	33	71.74%
Removing term limits	14	14	100.00%
Delaying elections	9	9	100.00%
Leader for life	9	9	100.00%
Changing term length	7	5	71.43%
Figurehead	6	5	83.33%
One-time arrangement	5	4	80.00%
Refusing election results	4	1	25.00%
Reassigning power role	4	2	50.00%
Rigging elections	3	2	66.67%
Cancelling elections	3	3	100.00%
Total	110	87	79.09%

According to our primary coding, we have identified 110 autocoup cases from 1945 to 2022, involving 73 countries. As shown in Table 2, the most common autocoup method is enabling re-election, accounting for 46 events. This is followed by removing term limits altogether, with 14 cases, and then delaying elections and declaring the leader for life, each with 9 cases.

Examining the success rates of autocoups, the total success rate is 79%, which is significantly higher than the roughly 50% success rate of classical coups. This suggests that incumbents are in an advantageous position to expand or extend their powers as executive leaders. They can do so openly and gradually, whereas coup plotters must operate in secrecy and face numerous challenges such as promissory issues and the risk of betrayal or exposure.

However, the success rates vary significantly across different methods. Removing term limits, delaying elections, declaring the leader for life, and cancelling elections are all 100% successful. In contrast, there are only 4 cases of refusing election results, with just one succeeding. Although this

sample is small, it suggests that in regimes where general elections are held and incumbents lose, the system is relatively more democratic. In such cases, incumbents must run for office without the ability to rig elections, making it less likely for them to overturn election results.

4 Determinants of Autocoup Attempts: Case Studies

4.1 High Frequency and Success Rate of Autocoups in Post-Communist Countries

From the dataset, we observe that in post-communist countries, both the frequency and success rate of autocoups are notably high. Post-communist countries refer to those that were communist regimes before the collapse of the Soviet Union, while most of them developed into ‘hybrid regimes’ (Nurumov and Vashchanka 2019) and only a few remain communist regimes after the collapse. In these countries, there are 12 documented cases of autocoups aimed at prolonging incumbency, with only 2 of these attempts failing. Examining the cases in post-communist countries, several characteristics stand out:

- **Inherited Authoritarian Systems:** Although most of these countries transitioned from communist regimes to non-communist governments (with the exception of China), they inherited the authoritarian systems of their communist past.
- **Continuity of Former Elites:** The transitions did not result in the removal or overthrow of the previous ruling groups. Instead, the former communist elites remained in power.
- **Subverted Democratic Processes:** Despite the introduction of general elections and term limits in most of these countries, the legacy of the former communist regimes often led to term limits being ignored and elections being rigged (Nurumov and Vashchanka 2019).

For example, Alexander Lukashenko was a member of the Supreme Soviet of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic before the dissolution of the Soviet Union. After the dissolution, he be-

came head of the interim anti-corruption committee of the Supreme Council of Belarus. Elected as the first president of Belarus in 1994, he has held the office ever since. Initially, the 1994 constitution set a maximum of two successive presidential terms, but Lukashenko removed this limit in 2004. Furthermore, international monitors have not regarded Belarusian elections as free and fair, except for his initial win. Despite significant protests against him, Lukashenko claimed to win with a high vote share, often exceeding 80% in each election. This pattern is evident in all five Central Asian countries of the former Soviet Union. Similarly, the post-dissolution leaders of these countries were high officials or heads of the former Soviet republics who continued their leadership in the presidency.

Another long-ruling example is Nursultan Nazarbayev, who was the first president of Kazakhstan from 1991 until 2019. He had been the real leader as the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan before the dissolution of the Soviet Union. After independence, he was elected as the first president and held the office until 2019, through various means like resetting the term limits due to the implementation of new constitutions. However, he did not officially eliminate the term limits but made an exemption for the First President, Nazarbayev ([Nurumov and Vashchanka 2019](#)). Unlike Lukashenko, who is still the incumbent of Belarus, Nazarbayev passed the presidency to Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, a specially designated successor, in 2019. However, he retained significant influence as the Chairman of the Security Council of Kazakhstan until 2022.

4.2 Autocoups for immediate re-election: Cases of Latin American countries

Latin America has a long history of maintaining term limit conventions. Simón Bolívar, the founding father of Bolivia, was a strong advocate for term limits, stating in 1819, “Nothing is as dangerous as allowing the same citizen to remain in power for a long time... That’s the origin of usurpation and tyranny” ([Ginsburg and Elkins 2019](#)). Although Bolívar eventually changed his stance, arguing in his 1826 Constitution Assembly speech that “a president for life with the right to choose the successor is the most sublime inspiration for the republican order,” term limits became a conven-

tion in Latin America. Approximately 81% of Latin American constitutions between independence and 1985 imposed some form of term limits on the presidency ([Marsteintredet 2019](#)).

Reviewing the cases in Latin American countries, we notice that:

- **Striving for Re-election:** Non-re-election or non-immediate re-election has been common in Latin America, unlike other presidential countries where two terms are more popular. Autocoup leaders in Latin America often attempt to overstay a consecutive term.
- **Resisting long extensions:** Autocoups for one more term are often successful, while attempts to overstay beyond this are frequently unsuccessful.

According to [Marsteintredet \(2019\)](#), non-consecutive re-election was mandated in about 64.9% of all constitutions between independence and 1985, while 5.9% banned re-election entirely. However, adherence to these conventions has varied across the region. Since Mexico introduced non-re-election institutions in 1911 at the start of the Mexican Revolution, they have never been violated since then ([Klesner 2019](#)). Panama, along with Uruguay, has never changed the rules of re-election, and since Costa Rica prohibited immediate presidential re-election in 1859, the country has only experienced a brief period between 1897 and 1913 in which the incumbent president could be re-elected ([Marsteintredet 2019](#)). In many other countries, however, constitutions have been frequently amended or violated. The pursuit of re-election or consecutive re-election has been a significant trigger for autocoups aimed at power extension in Latin American countries. There are 32 documented autocoup cases, with over 50% (17 cases) attempting to enable re-election.

Unlike those who attempt to overstay in office indefinitely, many Latin American leaders exit after their second term expires. Examples include President Menem of Argentina (1988-1999), President Fernando Cardoso of Brazil (1995-2003), President Danilo Medina of the Dominican Republic (2012-2020), and President Juan Orlando Hernández of Honduras (2014-2022) ([Ginsburg and Elkins 2019](#); [Marsteintredet 2019](#); [Landau, Roznai, and Dixon 2019](#); [Baturu 2019](#); [Neto and Acácio 2019](#)). This does not mean none of them tried to extend even longer, but most did not manipulate the process by abusing their power and accepted their unsuccessful outcomes soon.

For instance, President Menem of Argentina successfully extended one term by amending the constitution in 1994 to allow one executive re-election and was re-elected in 1995. However, when he attempted to reset his term, arguing that his first term from 1988 to 1995 did not count since it was under previous constitutions, his appeal was unanimously ruled out by the Supreme Court in March 1999 (Llanos 2019). A similar scenario occurred with President Álvaro Uribe of Colombia (2002-2010) (Baturó 2019). In contrast, Daniel Ortega, the incumbent president of Nicaragua, successfully extended his presidency. In 2009, the Supreme Court of Justice of Nicaragua allowed his re-running in 2011. In 2014, the National Assembly of Nicaragua approved constitutional amendments that abolished term limits for the presidency, allowing Ortega to run for an unlimited number of five-year terms, making him president since 2007 (Close 2019).

4.3 As common as classical coups: Cases of African countries

Classical coups have been very common in Africa, accounting for about 45% of all coups (219 out of 491) globally since 1950, involving 45 out of 54 African countries (Powell and Thyne 2011). Autocoups, although less common compared to coups, still have a significant presence in Africa. Among 113 documented autocoup cases, 46% (52 cases) occurred in Africa, involving 36 countries. The success rate of coups in Africa is roughly 50%, while the success rate of autocoups is about 83%, which is higher than both the success rate of coups and the average global success rate of autocoups, approximately 78%.

Identifying a clear pattern of autocoups in Africa is challenging, similar to the case with coups. Various factors have been proposed:

- **Natural Resources:** Countries rich in natural resources, particularly oil or diamonds, may see leaders more likely to attempt and succeed in extending their terms (Posner and Young, n.d.; Cheeseman 2015; Cheeseman and Klaas 2019).
- **Quality of Democracy:** The quality of democracy is a critical factor influencing respect for term limits (Reyntjens 2016).

- **International Influence:** International aid or donor influence can play a significant role in discouraging attempts at power extension ([Brown 2001](#); [Tangri and Mwenda 2010](#)).
- **Organized Opposition and Party Unity:** The extent of organized opposition and the president's ability to enforce unity within the ruling party are crucial factors ([Cheeseman 2019](#)).

Using the Africa Executive Term Limits (AETL) dataset, Cassani ([2020](#)) highlights human rights abuses and the desire for impunity as main drivers for incumbents to cling to power. The more authoritarian a leader, the more likely they are to attempt to break term limits and overstay in office. Additionally, a leader's ability to secure the loyalty of the armed forces through public investment increases the chances of success in overstaying.

Despite both coups and autocoups being prevalent, there has been a noticeable shift since the end of the Cold War in 1991. Coups have decreased, while autocoups have increased. This trend is partly due to the introduction of multi-party elections in Africa in the 1990s, which also brought in term limits for executives ([Cassani 2020](#); [Cheeseman 2019](#)). Before 1991, personal or military rule was more common, and term limits were less frequent. Post-1991, with more term limits introduced, challenges to these limits have increased. However, this does not imply that violations are more common than adherence to term limits.

5 Empirical Analysis: A Simple Example of Utilizing the Autocoup Dataset

With the availability of the autocoup dataset, we can conduct quantitative analyses beyond traditional case studies. This chapter provides a simple example of demonstrating how to utilize the dataset. To analyse the determinants of autocoup attempts, we employ a probit regression model. This model is appropriate for binary dependent variables, allowing us to estimate the probability of an autocoup attempt given the independent variables.

5.1 Data and Variables

5.1.1 Dependent Variable

- **Autocoup Attempts:** This binary variable indicates whether an autocoup was attempted during the tenure of an incumbent leader, based on the data introduced in this study.
- **Autocoup Success:** This binary variable indicates whether an attempted autocoup of the incumbent leader succeeded, based on the data introduced in this study.

5.1.2 Independent Variables

- **Economic Performance:** This variable is measured using two indicators: economic level and economic growth trend.

Economic Level: Represented by GDP per capita. This measure provides an indication of the overall economic health and standard of living in a country.

Economic Growth Trend: Assessed using the current-trend (CT) ratio, developed by Krishnarajan (2019). The CT ratio compares a country's current GDP per capita to the average GDP per capita over the previous five years. A higher CT ratio signifies stronger economic performance.

$$CT_{i,t} = \frac{GDP/cap_{i,t}}{\frac{1}{5} \sum_{k=1}^5 GDP/cap_{i,t-k}}$$

The GDP per capita data, expressed in constant 2017 international dollars (PPP) and measured in units of \$10,000, is sourced from the V-Dem dataset by Fariss et al. (2022). To account for the economic impact of the previous year, this data is lagged by one year.

- **Political Stability:** This variable captures overall regime stability by including a violence index that encompasses all types of internal and interstate wars and violence. The data for this index is sourced from the Major Episodes of Political Violence dataset by Marshall.

This index provides a comprehensive measure of the level of violence and conflict within a country, which can significantly impact power transitions. (Marshall 2005).

- **Degree of Democracy:** The level of democracy is gauged using Polity 5 scores at the entry year for each respective country. These scores range from -10 (fully autocratic) to +10 (fully democratic), capturing the extent of democratic versus autocratic governance. This dataset is sourced from the Centre for Systemic Peace (CSP)¹ and provides an essential measure of political regime type, which might influence the political stability and power transitions.
- **Population Size:** To account for its potential impact on leaders' tenures, the log of the population size is considered. This transformation helps in managing the wide range of population sizes across different countries. The data is sourced from the V-Dem dataset and is evaluated to understand its influence on power transitions. Larger populations may present more governance challenges and potential sources of opposition, thereby affecting the stability and longevity of a leader's tenure.
- **Leader's Age:** The age of the leader is included as an additional variable in the analysis, offering insights into potential correlations with leadership strength. Older leaders may have different experiences, networks, and health considerations that could influence their ability to maintain power. This data is sourced from the leaders dataset by (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009).

Different from analysing the determinants of coups, which theoretically could happen in each year, we assume that autoup happens only once during the tenure of the incumbent. Because once the incumbent succeeds an autoup, there is no necessary to stage another one. Of course, this is not the case in real time. A leader who successfully overstayed one term could try to overstay additional term, or even strive for leadership for life. A leader who failed in the first attempt might make another try if they are not removed due the first failure. To simplify the analysis, we overlook those possibilities.

¹Center for Systemic Peace: <https://www.systemicpeace.org>. Accessed on 2024-07-06.

Therefore, in the probit model, the unit of analysis in autocalps is the whole tenure of the leader, not country-year. So, we need to settle a base-year for the variables. For leaders who staged an autocalp, we take the year of their first attempts as the base-year, while for leaders who did not attempt to overstay, we take the middle year of their tenure as the base-year.

Unlike the analysis of coup determinants, which could theoretically occur in any given year, we assume that an autocalp happens only once during an incumbent leader's tenure. Once an incumbent succeeds in staging an autocalp, there is no need for another attempt. However, this assumption does not always reflect reality. A leader who successfully extends their term might attempt further extensions, striving for lifelong leadership. Conversely, a leader who fails in their first attempt may try again if they are not removed from power after the initial failure. For simplicity, we overlook these possibilities in our analysis.

Therefore, in our probit model, the unit of analysis for autocalps is the entire tenure of a leader, rather than a country-year. We establish a base year for the variables: for leaders who staged an autocalp, we use the year of their first attempt as the base year; for leaders who did not attempt to overstay, we use the middle year of their tenure as the base year.

5.2 Results and discussions

Table 3 summarizes the findings from the probit regression models based on our analysis of the determinants of autocalp attempts and their success.

Model 1, which examines autocalp attempts, reveals only one significant predictor besides the constant term. Among the regime types, personalist regimes significantly increase the likelihood of autocalp attempts, all else being equal. This suggests that leaders in personalist regimes are more prone to attempt to extend their power through autocalps compared to leaders in democratic regimes. Leaders in dominant-party and military regimes, however, show no significant difference in the likelihood of attempting an autocalp compared to democratic leaders.

The model for autocalp success (Model 2) shows similar dynamics. Personalist regimes again have a strong positive and significant effect on the success of autocalps compared to democratic

Table 3: Determinants of autocoup attempts and success (1945-2018)

	Coup Attempts (1)	Coup Outcome (2)
Constant	−1.576** (0.621)	−0.790 (1.958)
Regime: Dominant-party	0.152 (0.155)	0.690* (0.408)
Military	−0.158 (0.203)	0.621 (0.542)
Personalist	0.911*** (0.172)	1.631*** (0.458)
GDP per capita	−0.010 (0.011)	0.065 (0.046)
Economic trend	0.598 (0.516)	0.138 (1.781)
Political 5	0.002 (0.003)	0.003 (0.010)
Political violence	−0.050 (0.037)	0.134 (0.133)
Age	−0.001 (0.002)	0.004 (0.017)
Population(log)	−0.040 (0.047)	0.027 (0.145)
Observations	813	102
Log Likelihood	−281.765	−43.604
Akaike Inf. Crit.	583.531	107.207

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

leaders. Dominant-party regimes also show a positive and marginally significant effect. However, a detailed examination reveals that about half of the successful autoups in dominant-party regimes (9 out of 20) exhibit a personalist style, such as “party-personal-military” regimes.

This is logical since personalist leaders are typically much more powerful than other types of leaders, making them more inclined and capable of overstaying in power.

Other factors play an insignificant role in determining the attempts and outcomes of autoups. This aligns with our conclusions on the determinants of classic coups. Both coups and autoups are significantly affected by power dynamics. As power transitions involve the struggle between seizing and maintaining power, the balance of power status quo inevitably matters in both coups and autoups. This also explains the high success rate of autoups. Compared to power challengers, incumbents are in an obviously advantageous position. Incumbent leaders can use state power to their benefit, which is difficult to counteract. Even the abuse of power is often unchecked under a powerful leader’s rule.

The threshold for removing or impeaching an incumbent leader is very high. Without more than a majority or even greater support, it is very difficult to succeed. Using illegal means such as a coup is even more challenging, as the costs are high, the consequences are severe, and the likelihood of success is very low.

6 Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of autoups, specifically focusing on political events where incumbent leaders illegitimately extend their tenure in power. By refining the concept and distinguishing it from broader definitions, such as ‘self-coups’, ‘autogolpes’, ‘executive takeover’, we introduce a novel dataset of autoups (1945-2022). Through this more precise definition and dataset, we enhance the understanding and methods of analyzing the dynamics of irregular power transitions and the survival of political leaders.

Our findings reveal that personalist regimes are far more likely to experience autoup attempts

and are more likely to succeed compared to democracies. Dominant-party systems, often exhibiting personalist characteristics, also show an association with successful autocalups. While regime type significantly influences autocalups, other factors appear less impactful, mirroring classic coups where the balance of power is a more essential determinant. The high success rate of autocalups can be attributed to the inherent advantages incumbents possess, such as control over or abuse of state power and the difficulty of removing or impeaching them through legal or illegal means.

However, there are several limitations that future research could address. Firstly, the definition of an autocalup requires further commentary and discussion to gain wider acceptance. Accordingly, the dataset of autocalups requires further case-by-case verification to improve accuracy, although debates on some ambiguous cases will likely persist. Secondly, due to the nature of autocalups, which are less frequent than classic coups (491 coups versus 110 autocalups during the same period), the quantitative analysis cannot be conducted as a country-year variable as in coups. This raises the issue of choosing a base year. For example, when analyzing how GDP level or growth rate, the democratic index (such as Polity 5), or the age of the leader affect autocalup attempts, we need to decide which year's value should be used. In this study, we chose the middle year of a leader's tenure or the year they staged the autocalup, but determining the most appropriate year requires further discussion.

Despite these limitations, this research enhances our understanding of the mechanisms and motivations behind autocalups, contributing to the literature on political stability and democratic resilience. Future studies could build on this work by employing the dataset to explore more power dynamics or examine the long-term impacts of these events on political systems, particularly on democratic backsliding, democratic breakdown, and personalization of power.

References

- Antonio, Robert J. 2021. “Democracy and Capitalism in the Interregnum: Trump’s Failed Self-Coup and After.” *Critical Sociology* 48 (6): 937–65. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08969205211049499>.
- Baturo, Alexander. 2014. “Democracy, Dictatorship, and Term Limits.” <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.4772634>.
- . 2019. “Continuismo in Comparison.” In, 75–100. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198837404.003.0005>.
- Baturo, Alexander, and Jakob Tolstrup. 2022. “Incumbent Takeovers.” *Journal of Peace Research* 60 (2): 373–86. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433221075183>.
- Bermeo, Nancy. 2016. “On Democratic Backsliding.” *Journal of Democracy* 27 (1): 5–19. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012>.
- Bomprezzi, Pietro, Axel Dreher, Andreas Fuchs, Teresa Hailer, Andreas Kammerlander, Lennart Kaplan, Silvia Marchesi, Tania Masi, Charlotte Robert, and Kerstin Unfried. 2024. “Wedded to Prosperity? Informal Influence and Regional Favoritism.” Discussion Paper. CEPR.
- Brown, Stephen. 2001. “Authoritarian Leaders and Multiparty Elections in Africa: How Foreign Donors Help to Keep Kenya’s Daniel Arap Moi in Power.” *Third World Quarterly* 22 (5): 725–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590120084575>.
- Cameron, Maxwell A. 1998a. “Latin American Autogolpes : Dangerous Undertows in the Third Wave of Democratisation.” *Third World Quarterly* 19 (2): 219–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436599814433>.
- Cameron, Maxwell A. 1998b. “Self-Coups: Peru, Guatemala, and Russia.” *Journal of Democracy* 9 (1): 125–39. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1998.0003>.
- Cassani, Andrea. 2020. “Autocratisation by Term Limits Manipulation in Sub-Saharan Africa.” *Africa Spectrum* 55 (3): 228–50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002039720964218>.
- Chaisty, Paul. 2019. “The Uses and Abuses of Presidential Term Limits in Russian Politics.” In, 385–402. Oxford University PressOxford. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198837404.003>.

0019.

- Cheeseman, Nic. 2015. "Democracy in Africa," March. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139030892>.
- . 2019. "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Term Limits, Elections, and Political Change in Kenya, Uganda, and Zambia." In, 311–38. Oxford University PressOxford. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198837404.003.0016>.
- Cheeseman, Nic, and Brian Klaas. 2019. *How to Rig an Election*. Yale University Press. <https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300235210>.
- Close, David. 2019. "Presidential Term Limits in Nicaragua." In, 159–78. Oxford University PressOxford. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198837404.003.0009>.
- Ezrow, Natasha. 2019. "Term Limits and Succession in Dictatorships." In, 269–88. Oxford University PressOxford. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198837404.003.0014>.
- Fariss, Christopher J., Therese Anders, Jonathan N. Markowitz, and Miriam Barnum. 2022. "New Estimates of Over 500 Years of Historic GDP and Population Data." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 66 (3): 553–91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027211054432>.
- Frantz, Erica, and Elizabeth A. Stein. 2016. "Countering Coups: Leadership Succession Rules in Dictatorships." *Comparative Political Studies* 50 (7): 935–62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414016655538>.
- Ginsburg, Tom, and Zachary Elkins. 2019. "One Size Does Not Fit All." In, 37–52. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198837404.003.0003>.
- Ginsburg, Tom, James Melton, and Zachary Elkins. 2010. "On the Evasion of Executive Term Limits." *Wm. & Mary L. Rev.* 52: 1807.
- . 2011. "On the Evasion of Executive Term Limits." *William and Mary Law Review* 52: 1807.
- Goemans, Henk E., Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Giacomo Chiozza. 2009. "Introducing Archigos: A Dataset of Political Leaders." *Journal of Peace Research* 46 (2): 269–83. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343308100719>.
- Helmke, Gretchen. 2017. "Institutions on the Edge," January. <https://doi.org/10.1017/>

9781139031738.

- Klesner, Joseph L. 2019. "The Politics of Presidential Term Limits in Mexico." In, 141–58. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198837404.003.0008>.
- Krishnarajan, Suthan. 2019. "Economic Crisis, Natural Resources, and Irregular Leader Removal in Autocracies." *International Studies Quarterly* 63 (3): 726–41. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqz006>.
- Landau, David, Yaniv Roznai, and Rosalind Dixon. 2019. "Term Limits and the Unconstitutional Constitutional Amendment Doctrine." In, 53–74. Oxford University PressOxford. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198837404.003.0004>.
- Llanos, Mariana. 2019. "The Politics of Presidential Term Limits in Argentina." In, 473–94. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198837404.003.0023>.
- Marshall, Monty G. 2005. "Current Status of the World's Major Episodes of Political Violence." *Report to Political Instability Task Force.(3 February)*.
- Marsteintredet, Leiv. 2019. "Presidential Term Limits in Latin America: C.1820–1985." In, 103–22. Oxford University PressOxford. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198837404.003.0006>.
- Marsteintredet, Leiv, and Andrés Malamud. 2019. "Coups with Adjectives: Conceptual Stretching or Innovation in Comparative Research?" *Political Studies* 68 (4): 1014–35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321719888857>.
- Mauceri, Philip. 1995. "State Reform, Coalitions, and The Neoliberal *Autogolpe* in Peru." *Latin American Research Review* 30 (1): 7–37. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0023879100017155>.
- Neto, Octavio Amorim, and Igor P. Acácio. 2019. "Presidential Term Limits as a Credible-Commitment Mechanism." In, 123–40. Oxford University PressOxford. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198837404.003.0007>.
- Nurumov, Dmitry, and Vasil Vashchanka. 2019. "Presidential Terms in Kazakhstan." In, 221–46. Oxford University PressOxford. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198837404.003.0012>.
- Pion-Berlin, David, Thomas Bruneau, and Richard B. Goetze. 2022. "The Trump Self-Coup Attempt: Comparisons and Civil–Military Relations." *Government and Opposition* 58 (4): 789–

806. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2022.13>.
- Posner, Daniel N., and Daniel J. Young. n.d. "Term Limits: Leadership, Political Competition and the Transfer of Power." In, 260–78. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316562888.011>.
- Powell, Jonathan M, and Clayton L Thyne. 2011. "Global Instances of Coups from 1950 to 2010: A New Dataset." *Journal of Peace Research* 48 (2): 249–59. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343310397436>.
- Przeworski, Adam, Michael E. Alvarez, Jose Antonio Cheibub, and Fernando Limongi. 2000. "Democracy and Development," August. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511804946>.
- Reyntjens, Filip. 2016. "A New Look at the Evidence." *Journal of Democracy* 27 (3): 61–68. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0044>.
- Stinnett, Douglas M., Jaroslav Tir, Paul F. Diehl, Philip Schafer, and Charles Gochman. 2002. "The Correlates of War (Cow) Project Direct Contiguity Data, Version 3.0." *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 19 (2): 59–67. <https://doi.org/10.1177/073889420201900203>.
- Svolik, Milan W. 2014. "Which Democracies Will Last? Coups, Incumbent Takeovers, and the Dynamic of Democratic Consolidation." *British Journal of Political Science* 45 (4): 715–38. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0007123413000550>.
- Tangri, Roger, and Andrew M. Mwenda. 2010. "President Museveni and the Politics of Presidential Tenure in Uganda." *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 28 (1): 31–49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02589000903542574>.
- Thyne, Clayton L., and Jonathan Powell. 2019. "Coups Research," October. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.369>.
- Versteeg, Mila, Timothy Horley, Anne Meng, Mauricio Guim, and Marilyn Guirguis. 2020. "The Law and Politics of Presidential Term Limit Evasion." *Colum. L. Rev.* 120: 173.