

# Leadership Transitions and Survival: Coups, Autocoups, and Power Dynamics

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## Abstract

This thesis aims to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the most common irregular power transitions—coups and autocoups—and the survival of political leadership in their aftermath. Coups have been a central topic in political science literature, but the significant attention of this study is given to how power dynamics and the expected chances of success determine coup attempts. Employing Heck’s two-stage sample selection model, we find that the expected chances of coup success play a crucial role in motivating coup attempts. These chances are significantly influenced by the power dynamics between the incumbent and potential coup plotters, which are, in turn, affected by regime types. In contrast, autocoups have received less scholarly attention. This neglect stems partly from the underestimation of autocoups’ impact on democratization and democratic resilience, and partly from the lack of a widely accepted definition and dataset. This study addresses these gaps by providing a refined definition of autocoups, reviewing existing terms and definitions such as self-coup, autogolpe, and executive takeover. Based on this new definition, we introduce a novel dataset of autocoups that can facilitate more quantitative studies. Additionally, this study includes several case studies and an empirical analysis to demonstrate the utility of the new dataset in future research.

Beyond power transitions, political leadership survival is another critical topic in political science. This study offers a comparative analysis of leadership survival following coups and autocoups. Using the Cox proportional hazards model and a time-dependent Cox model, we present compelling evidence of differing survival times between leaders who enter through coups and those who extend power via autocoups. The findings indicate that coup-entry leaders have a much shorter average tenure and a higher probability of being ousted compared to autocoup leaders. These results suggest that the relatively low cost and high returns of autocoups could incentivize more incumbents to seize power in this manner, potentially leading to democratic backsliding.

This research makes several contributions to the academic literature. First, it provides a general and comparative framework for the most common irregular power transitions: coups

and autcoups. Second, it introduces a refined definition and a dataset of autcoups, enabling comparative studies on the dynamics of irregular power transitions alongside coups. Finally, it highlights the significant influence of power transitions and leadership survival on democratic backsliding, democratic breakdown, and personalization of power.

*Keywords:* Coups, Autcoups, Power transitions, Leadership Survival

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Motivation of research

Irregular power transitions are a central topic in political science, with coups being a significant focus due to their frequency and impact. According to the Archigos dataset ([Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009](#)), from 1945 to 2015, there were approximately 145 instances of irregular leader exits, with coups<sup>1</sup> accounting for more than half (79 leaders). The often-cited coup dataset ([Powell and Thyne 2011](#)) records even more leaders (245 cases) removed by coups from 1950 to 2023.

Given their prevalence and substantial influence on political systems, coups have been extensively studied, especially since 2000 ([Thyne and Powell 2019](#)). Consequently, the concept of a coup is comparatively clear. Scholars often follow the definition by Powell and Thyne (2011), which describes coups as “illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive... [a coup is successful] if the perpetrators seize and hold power for at least seven days” (p. 252). Although debates persist, two elements are clear: First, the perpetrators are elites within the ruling group targeting incumbent executive leaders. Second, the strategy involves completely removing the incumbents, not merely seizing part of their power.

Numerous datasets have been developed for studying coups, such as the Global Instances of Coups ([Powell and Thyne 2011](#)), the Cline Center Coup d’État Project Dataset ([Peyton et al. 2024](#)), and the Colpus Dataset ([Chin, Carter, and Wright 2021](#)). These datasets are well-developed and frequently used in political science research.

In contrast, autocoups are less studied. There is no widely accepted conceptual definition, and various terms, such as self-coup, autogolpe, and executive takeover, are used by different scholars. Consequently, a comprehensive dataset for autocoups is lacking. Existing definitions often focus on the mode of power grab, as seen in the case of Peru’s President Alberto Fujimori in 1992. For example, Cameron (1998) defines an autogolpe as a temporary suspension of the constitution and dissolution of Congress by the executive, who then rules by decree. This definition, and sim-

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<sup>1</sup>According to the Archigos dataset, “Removed by Military, without Foreign Support” and “Removed by Other Government Actors, without Foreign Support” in the variable `exitcode` are classified as coups.

ilar ones, do not clearly distinguish between power expansions and power extensions<sup>2</sup>, leading to conceptual confusion.

This issue is not as problematic when analyzing coups and autocoups separately. However, since both share the root concept of “coup”, they should be defined in more equivalent and related manner. If we aim to establish a general framework for irregular power transitions and leader survival, defining autocoups in a manner equivalent to coups is essential. While coups are significant for their role in irregular power transitions, autocoups are important as well because they prevent the expected transition of power. A comparative analysis of the survival of leaders who come to power through coups versus autocoups is both interesting and important.

This study addresses this gap by creating a comprehensive framework for analyzing coups and autocoups, particularly their determinants and the survival of leaders who emerge from these events. We contribute to the political science literature in three main aspects. First, we emphasize the role of power dynamics, primarily determined by regime types, in determining coup success and, consequently, coup attempts. Second, we introduce a refined definition of autocoup and a novel dataset, allowing for comparative analysis with classic coups. Third, using the existing coup dataset and the new autocoup dataset, we employ survival analysis to demonstrate how different entry modes significantly affect leadership survival, providing a starting point for analyzing democratic resilience.

By doing so, we gain clearer insights into the factors that determine irregular power transition attempts and their success or failure, and why leaders entering power through different methods may have varying survival rates.

## 1.2 Overview of Chapters

This study includes three main chapters beyond the introduction.

**Chapter 2:** Discusses the determinants of classic coup attempts. Although coup research is

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<sup>2</sup>Power expansion and power extension are somewhat ambiguous terms. In this study, we define power expansion as acquiring additional powers beyond those originally associated with the leader’s role or position. Conversely, we define power extension as lengthening a leader’s tenure beyond the originally mandated term.

extensive, most studies focus on the influence of observable factors like economic performance, political stability, previous coups, or coup-proofing strategies. This study, however, focuses on the more essential but less observable factor-expected coup success rates, which is often overlooked by previous studies. Using Heckman's two-staged sample selection model, we find evidence that success rates significantly influence coup attempts. The success rates are primarily influenced by the balance of power between incumbents and challengers, which is greatly determined by regime types. The results indicate that military regimes face a much higher risk of coups compared to dominant-party regimes.

**Chapter 3:** Clarifies the concept of autocalps, focusing on power extensions by incumbent leaders. By distinguishing autocalps from broader concepts like self-coups or executive takeovers, we redefine autocalps as instances where incumbent leaders refuse to transition power as mandated, thereby overstaying in office. Based on this refined definition, we introduce a novel dataset of autocalp events from 1945 to 2022, including 110 attempts and 87 successes. Using this dataset, we present case studies and empirical analysis to demonstrate its utility for quantitative research.

**Chapter 4:** Examines how the method of power acquisition impacts the longevity of coup-entry and autocalp leaders. We hypothesize that the method of accession significantly affects leader tenure. Using the Cox proportional hazards model and a time-dependent Cox model, we provide evidence of differing survival times between these two leader types. The findings indicate that coup-entry leaders face a significantly higher risk of removal compared to autocalp leaders. This underscores the implications for political stability and democratic processes, suggesting that the relatively low cost and high returns of autocalps could incentivize incumbents to seize power in this manner, potentially leading to democratic backsliding and personalization of power.

## 2 Conclusion

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