Power Dynamics and Autocoup Attempts

2025-06-23

Abstract

This study investigates the determinants of autocoup attempts, with the aim of enhancing our understanding of the political dynamics underpinning extra-constitutional tenure extensions by incumbent leaders. Addressing a notable lacuna in the existing literature, it argues that the balance of power is a critical factor shaping the likelihood of such events. In contrast to classical coups—which often emerge from fragmented or unstable power structures—autocoups typically occur in contexts characterised by stable yet highly concentrated authority. To render the concept of power balance empirically observable, regime type is employed as a proxy, capturing the structural distribution of power between incumbents and institutional constraints or elite challengers. Drawing on a bias-reduced logistic regression model, the analysis finds regime type to be a statistically significant predictor of autocoup attempts. Specifically, leaders governing within presidential democracies and personalist autocracies are significantly more likely to engage in tenure-extending autocoups than those in dominant-party regimes. The study contributes to the conceptual refinement of autocoups and introduces a novel dataset, which may serve as a foundation for future empirical research. Furthermore, it offers a more systematic and empirically grounded account of irregular leadership transitions, broadening the analytical scope from irregular removal to irregular tenure extension. Finally, the findings underscore the critical role of regime type in shaping the strategic calculus of incumbents contemplating an autocoup.

Keywords: Autocoups, Coup, Regime types, Tenure Extension, Authoritarianism

1 Introduction

Why are some political leaders removed from office prematurely, while others succeed in extending their tenure beyond constitutionally mandated limits? The existing literature has examined the former issue extensively—namely, the forced removal of leaders prior to the completion of their terms. Most such instances are attributed to classical coups, defined as illegal and overt attempts by military or state elites to depose a sitting executive (Powell and Thyne 2011), due to their frequency and immediate impact on incumbent displacement. For example, in autocratic regimes, classical coups account for nearly one-third of all leadership exits, surpassing regular transitions, which comprise just over one-fifth (Frantz and Stein 2016). Moreover, over 63% of non-constitutional removals in dictatorships are attributable to coups (Svolik 2009).

By contrast, the latter part of the question—why some leaders are able to extend their tenure beyond constitutional limits—remains comparatively underexplored. This oversight stems primarily from conceptual ambiguity and the lack of systematic data on such political events, specifically autocoups, which has impeded rigorous empirical investigation. Nonetheless, the importance of studying autocoups should not be underestimated. Firstly, autocoups represent one of the most prevalent forms of irregular leadership transition, with over 80 documented cases since 1945. Their frequency has notably increased since 2000, coinciding with a marked global decline in classical coups (Bermeo 2016; Thyne and Powell 2019). Secondly, autocoups exert profound consequences on political stability and democratic development, frequently leading to long-term institutional erosion. Thirdly, identifying the drivers of autocoup attempts is essential for understanding their broader political impact; without a clear grasp of the conditions under which autocoups occur, efforts to prevent or mitigate their harmful effects remain severely constrained.

Although autocoups differ fundamentally from classical coups, particularly in that they are orchestrated by incumbents rather than by external challengers, the two phenomena share essential features as disruptions to the established political order. Accordingly, the methodological tools commonly applied to the study of traditional coups may be fruitfully adapted to the analysis of autocoups. However, despite the extensive literature on coup dynamics (Gassebner, Gutmann, and

Voigt 2016), regime type is frequently treated as a background condition or control variable, rather than as a central explanatory factor.

This research contends that the likelihood of an autocoup attempt is significantly influenced by the structural distribution of power embedded within regime type. Unlike classical coups, which often arise in contexts marked by contested or fragmented authority, autocoups tend to occur in regimes characterised by concentrated and stabilised power. Given the difficulty of directly measuring internal power dynamics, regime type is employed as a proxy variable. The underlying assumption is that regime type reflects core institutional arrangements—such as the distribution of authority, the strength of constitutional constraints, and the incumbent's capacity to subvert democratic norms. Examining variation across regime types thus facilitates a more nuanced understanding of the institutional foundations that condition the risk of autocoups. These power structures are generally stable over time, as they both shape and are shaped by the regime's overarching institutional design (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014).

Drawing upon a refined conceptualisation of autocoups and an original global dataset encompassing autocoup events from 1945 to 2023, this study aims to make a substantive contribution through a quantitative analysis of the determinants of autocoup attempts.

To empirically assess this proposition, the study utilises both a standard logistic regression model and a bias-reduced logistic regression model to evaluate how regime type influences the probability of incumbents seeking to extend their tenure through extra-constitutional means. Given the scarcity of quantitative research on autocoups, this investigation offers a potentially pioneering contribution to the literature by providing a theoretically grounded and methodologically robust analysis of their underlying determinants.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 introduces the refined conceptualisation of autocoups and the original autocoup dataset; Section 3 explores the dynamics and outcomes of autocoup attempts; Section 4 outlines the research design, including methodological approach and variable selection; Section 5 presents and interprets the empirical findings, highlighting key patterns and implications; and Section 6 concludes by summarising the main insights and

reflecting on their broader relevance for understanding and mitigating the risks associated with autocoups.

2 Autocoup Conceptualisation and Dataset

2.1 Terminology

The academic discourse on autocoups utilises a diverse lexicon to describe the extension of power or tenure by incumbent leaders. The most commonly employed term is 'self-coup', or its Spanish counterpart 'autogolpe' (Przeworski et al. 2000; Maxwell A. Cameron 1998a; Bermeo 2016; Helmke 2017; Marsteintredet and Malamud 2019). This term rose to prominence following the actions of Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori in 1992, who dissolved Congress, suspended the constitution, and governed by decree (Mauceri 1995; Maxwell A. Cameron 1998b). However, as Marsteintredet and Malamud (2019) notes, 'self-coup' can be misleading, as it suggests the leader is acting against their own interests, whereas such actions typically target other state institutions or constitutional constraints.

A second category of terminology includes descriptors such as 'presidential coup', 'executive coup', 'constitutional coup', 'electoral coup', 'judicial coup', 'slow-motion coup', 'soft coup', and 'parliamentary coup' (Marsteintredet and Malamud 2019). Whilst these terms may highlight specific mechanisms or contexts, their proliferation often leads to conceptual ambiguity. Many focus on the method of power acquisition but fail consistently to identify the perpetrator. Furthermore, such mechanisms—judicial rulings, legislative manoeuvres, or administrative decrees—may be employed either by or against executive actors, thereby complicating classification further.

A third group of terms encompasses phrases such as 'incumbent takeover', 'executive takeover', and 'overstay'. For example, 'incumbent takeover' is defined as "an event perpetrated by a ruling executive that significantly reduces the formal and/or informal constraints on his/her power" (Baturo and Tolstrup 2022, 374), building on Svolik (2014). Similarly, 'overstay' refers to "staying longer than the maximum term as it stood when the candidate originally came into office" (Gins-

burg, Melton, and Elkins 2011, 1844). These terms clearly delineate the actor (the incumbent) and the action (power consolidation or term extension) but often fail to convey the illegality or unconstitutionality of such actions. Unlike 'coup', which inherently denotes an unlawful seizure of power, terms such as 'takeover' or 'overstay' may inadvertently downplay the normative severity of these events.

Given that many existing terms prioritise procedural mechanisms over normative considerations or conflate legal and extra-legal practices, this study proposes 'autocoup' as the most precise and analytically robust term. It accurately identifies both the actor and the act, clearly conveys the illegitimacy and gravity of the behaviour, and establishes theoretical connections to conventional coups. Consequently, 'autocoup' serves as the most effective term for capturing and analysing this phenomenon, aligning seamlessly with the unified analytical framework this study aims to establish.

2.2 Definition

The conceptualisation of autocoups in political science literature is marked by ambiguity, particularly around whether their defining feature is the expansion of executive power, the extension of tenure, or a combination of both. Power expansion refers to an incumbent accumulating authority beyond their original constitutional remit—often through centralisation or weakening of institutional constraints—while tenure extension involves efforts to remain in office beyond the term originally prescribed, frequently by way of constitutional amendments or electoral manipulation.

Many existing definitions conflate or overemphasise power expansion. For example, Maxwell A. Cameron (1998a) defines a self-coup as a suspension of the constitution and dissolution of congress, resulting in rule by decree until new elections and a referendum can establish a more empowered executive (p. 220). However, the phrase "broader executive power" remains vague. Likewise, the notion of an "incumbent takeover" as used by Baturo and Tolstrup (2022), drawing on Svolik (2014), centres on the erosion of formal or informal checks on executive power (p. 374), though the associated dataset includes both power expansion and tenure extension. In contrast,

Ginsburg, Melton, and Elkins (2011) offers a more precise definition of "overstay" as exceeding the original term limit (p. 1844), focusing explicitly on tenure.

This study argues that tenure extension—rather than power expansion—constitutes the core of an autocoup. Conceptually, this aligns autocoups with traditional coups, which involve the disruption of executive tenure rather than a reduction in power. Just as a coup entails premature removal from office, an autocoup should be understood as the illegitimate extension of an incumbent's tenure. An executive who loses power but remains in office does not qualify; likewise, a leader who consolidates power while respecting term limits is better described in terms of executive aggrandisement, not autocoup.

In practice, power expansion often serves as a strategic means to achieve tenure extension. The widely cited case of President Alberto Fujimori in Peru illustrates this point. His 1992 suspension of the constitution and dissolution of Congress ultimately enabled him to remain in power: the 1993 Constitution allowed a second term, and a controversial "authentic interpretation" by his allies enabled a third run in 2000 (Ezrow 2019). These actions were not ends in themselves but instrumental to prolonging his rule.

Finally, tenure extension offers a clearer empirical basis for classification than the often ambiguous and difficult-to-measure concept of power expansion. Definitions like Maxwell A. Cameron (1998a)'s leave open questions about whether one or both of certain actions (e.g., suspending the constitution or dissolving congress) are necessary conditions for an autocoup.

In light of these considerations, this study defines an autocoup as ***the extension of an incumbent leader's tenure in office beyond the originally mandated limit, achieved through extra-constitutional means***.

2.3 Autocoup dataset

The autocoup dataset is constructed with reference to established datasets and scholarly literature, thereby ensuring both reliability and comprehensiveness. The principal sources used for case coding are listed in Table 1. The Archigos dataset (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009) and the

Table 1: Main Data Sources for Coding the Autocoup Dataset

Dataset	Authors	Coverage	Obervations
Archigos	Goemans et al (2009)	1875-2015	3409
PLAD	Bomprezzi et al. (2024)	1989-2023	1334
Incumbent Takeover	Baturo and Tolstrup (2022)	1913-2019	279

Political Leaders' Affiliation Database (PLAD) (Bomprezzi et al. 2024) provide detailed records of national leaders from 1875 to 2023. Although the temporal scope of this study is restricted to events occurring from 1945 onwards, these datasets remain essential for identifying de facto leaders and distinguishing them from nominal heads of state.

The Incumbent Takeover dataset (Baturo and Tolstrup 2022), which synthesises information from eleven distinct sources, offers an extensive inventory of cases in which executive actors significantly reduced institutional constraints on their authority. As this dataset encompasses both instances of power consolidation and tenure extension, cross-referencing with Archigos (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009) and PLAD (Bomprezzi et al. 2024) was undertaken to assess whether individual cases met the definitional criteria for an autocoup.

In total, 83 events were identified and coded as autocoups. Of these, 50 correspond to entries found within the Incumbent Takeover dataset, while the remaining 33 were newly identified and coded by the author through cross-verification with additional sources, including Archigos (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009), PLAD (Bomprezzi et al. 2024), and contemporary news media.

The primary coding process yielded 83 instances of autocoups between 1945 and 2023, spanning 63 countries. This dataset provides a robust empirical foundation for analysing patterns and trajectories in autocoup activity across a diverse range of political and institutional contexts.

A breakdown of the methods employed by incumbents to extend their tenure is provided in Table 2. The most commonly observed strategy is the legalisation or reintroduction of re-election provisions, accounting for 37 cases. This is followed by the removal of term limits (10 cases) and the declaration of the incumbent as president for life (7 cases). Other tactics—such as the cancel-

Table 2: Autocoup Methods and Success Rates (1945-2023)

Autocoup Method	Attempted	Succeeded	Success Rate
Enabling re-election	37	26	70.3%
Removing term limits	10	10	100.0%
Leader for life	7	7	100.0%
Delaying elections	5	5	100.0%
One-time arrangement	5	4	80.0%
Changing term length	5	4	80.0%
Reassigning power role	4	2	50.0%
Refusing election results	3	0	0.0%
Figurehead	3	3	100.0%
Cancelling elections	3	3	100.0%
Rigging elections	1	0	0.0%
Total	83	64	77.1%

Source: Autocoup dataset

lation of scheduled elections or refusal to concede electoral defeat—are less frequently observed. Electoral manipulation is recorded in only one case, primarily due to the inherent difficulty of verifying such practices with certainty, despite strong circumstantial indications in many instances.

Importantly, and in contrast to classical coups—which occur predominantly within autocratic regimes—a significant proportion of autocoups have taken place in democratic contexts. Of the 83 identified cases, 30 occurred in democracies, of which 29 were in presidential systems. This constitutes approximately 36% of the total. By contrast, traditional coups have been markedly rarer in democratic settings, with only 99 out of 493 recorded cases (20%) occurring under democratic rule.

3 Dynamics of autocoup attempts

Like traditional coup attempts, autocoups are driven by two fundamental elements: the disposition of incumbent leaders—referring to their motivations and willingness to act—and their capability, defined by the resources and opportunities at their disposal. However, autocoups exhibit two notable features that distinguish them from classical coups. First, whereas traditional coups occur pre-

dominantly in autocracies (C. Thyne and Powell 2014), over one-third of documented autocoups have taken place in democratic regimes. Second, while the success rate of traditional coups hovers around 50%, more than 77% of autocoup attempts have resulted in success, according to autocoup dataset introduced in Section 2. These distinctions indicate that the dynamics of disposition and capability underlying autocoups differ significantly from those of traditional coups.

This section explores the complex dynamics of autocoup attempts, with particular emphasis on how the motivations of incumbents, the determinants of success, and the institutional frameworks of various regime types shape the vulnerability of states to such extra-constitutional power extensions.

3.1 Motivations for autocoups

Incumbents seeking to prolong their tenure may be driven by a range of motivations, broadly falling into three principal categories: personal ambition, appeals to national interest, and self-preservation.

First, the pursuit of personal power constitutes a compelling incentive for many leaders. The capacity to govern free from institutional constraints enables incumbents to exercise dominance over national policy-making, access state resources, influence the judiciary and legislature, and retain the prestige associated with holding high office. For some, the aspiration to secure a lasting political legacy—to be remembered as a transformative figure—further amplifies the appeal of extended rule.

Second, tenure extensions are often justified by incumbents in the name of the national interest. A commonly advanced rationale suggests that a single term is insufficient for the completion of long-term reforms or development initiatives. Within this narrative, remaining in power is portrayed as essential to ensuring the continuity and success of ongoing projects. The autocoup is thus framed not as an act of self-interest, but as a necessary step for the greater good.

Third, autocoups may serve as mechanisms of self-preservation. Incumbents facing the prospect of prosecution for corruption, human rights violations, or other transgressions may view continued tenure as a means of preserving legal immunity. Additionally, those who have amassed

significant political adversaries during their rule may fear retribution upon leaving office. In such cases, the extension of power is not merely a product of ambition but also a strategy for survival—intended to shield the leader from legal or political repercussions.

3.2 Power dynamics and autocoups

While motivations may initiate an incumbent's decision to pursue an autocoup, the decisive factor mainly lies in their ability to implement and sustain such an action. The relatively high frequency and remarkable success rate of autocoups—over 77%, compared to approximately 50% for classical coups—suggest that incumbents benefit from notable structural advantages when attempting to extend power. These advantages are not limited to autocracies but are also evident in democratic systems, underscoring the variation in institutional leverage available to incumbents across different regime types.

This reality necessitates a closer examination of state power structures, particularly the allocation of control over the military. The allegiance of the armed forces is a critical determinant of autocoup outcomes. If the military remains loyal to the executive, resistance—whether from civil society, the judiciary, or the legislature—can be suppressed or marginalised. Conversely, open defiance or refusal by the military to support the incumbent may render an autocoup untenable.

Nevertheless, it would be reductive to assume that formal designation as commander-in-chief guarantees unqualified military control. Just as it is overly simplistic to attribute the success of traditional coups solely to the presence of military force (Singh 2016), it is equally erroneous to presume that incumbents invariably enjoy the unconditional loyalty of the armed forces. Nominal titles often obscure the complex and sometimes precarious dynamics underpinning military allegiance.

In autocratic regimes, while the military may not be bound by constitutional principles, it is not inherently loyal to the head of state. Executives depend on military officers to execute their commands; however, these officers may harbour independent political ambitions or competing loyalties. A case in point is Uganda in 1971, when President Milton Obote attempted to dismiss

General Idi Amin. In response, Amin exploited his influence within the armed forces to mount a successful coup, ousting Obote (Sudduth 2017).

By contrast, in consolidated democracies, military loyalty is typically institutionalised through allegiance to the constitution rather than to individual officeholders. For example, in the United States, following the 2020 presidential election, General Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, publicly reaffirmed the military's constitutional commitment: "We are unique among militaries. We do not take an oath to a king or a queen, a tyrant or a dictator. We do not take an oath to an individual. We take an oath to the Constitution." (US Army Museum, 12 November 2020[1])

In hybrid regimes or fragile democracies, attempts to prolong executive tenure may entail significant political risks. In Niger, for example, President Mamadou Tandja's attempt in 2009 to amend the constitution to permit a third term precipitated a military coup in 2010 (Miller 2016). Similarly, in Honduras the same year, President Manuel Zelaya was removed from office by the military after seeking to alter the constitution to allow immediate re-election (Muñoz-Portillo and Treminio 2019).

3.3 Regime types and autocoups

Given the complexities discussed, a more effective analytical strategy entails evaluating the broader balance of power within political systems. As direct observation of this balance is inherently challenging, this study adopts regime type as a proxy—an approach consistent with established methodologies in comparative politics. Regime types encapsulate the institutional architecture of power distribution, particularly with respect to control over the military, political appointments, and policy-making authority.

Following the typology developed by Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2014), regimes can be categorised as follows:

Military regimes are governed by a junta, typically comprising senior military officers who collectively determine leadership and policy direction. Notable examples include Brazil (1964–

[1]CNN. *Top US General Stands Firm Amid Pentagon Turmoil.* 12 November 2020. Available at: https://edition.cnn.com/2020/11/12/politics/mark-milley-pentagon-turmoil/index.html [Accessed 24 April 2025].

1985), Argentina (1976–1983), and El Salvador (1948–1984) (Geddes 1999).

Personalist regimes revolve around a dominant individual who wields unchecked authority over the military, policy decisions, and succession processes. Prominent instances include Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic (1930–1961), Idi Amin in Uganda (1971–1979), and Jean-Bédel Bokassa in the Central African Republic (1966–1979) (Geddes 1999).

Dominant-party regimes concentrate authority within a structured political party, with the leader operating either as part of or at the helm of the party apparatus. Illustrative cases include the PRI in Mexico, CCM in Tanzania, and the Leninist parties of Eastern Europe (Geddes 1999).

Among these regime types, personalist autocracies are particularly conducive to autocoups. The concentration of power in a single individual weakens institutional checks and fosters loyalty—particularly from the military—through mechanisms of personal patronage. While military regimes are rooted in coercive power, they are often beset by internal factionalism, rendering them more susceptible to traditional coups than to autocoups. Dominant-party regimes occupy a more ambiguous position: although party structures can constrain executive action, exceptionally powerful party leaders may still initiate autocoups, as exemplified by Xi Jinping's constitutional amendments in 2018 within a dominant-party framework.

Monarchies, though technically autocratic, generally render autocoups redundant, as monarchs typically rule for life by constitutional design.

A key clarification is warranted at this juncture: why might leaders in personalist regimes—already possessing extensive authority—feel compelled to extend their tenure further? The answer lies in distinguishing between the scope and duration of power. While such leaders may exercise considerable de facto control over state institutions, many initially assume office via legal or constitutional channels, necessitating a gradual process of consolidation. In this context, autocoups function as formal mechanisms to institutionalise existing dominance—transforming informal power into legally sanctioned permanence. This dynamic is exemplified by the repeated tenure extensions pursued by Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenko (Baturo and Elgie 2019).

In post-Soviet Russia, President Boris Yeltsin presided over the transformation of a parliamen-

tary system into a personalist regime. However, Yeltsin himself did not overstay his term; instead, he designated Vladimir Putin as his successor. Upon assuming office in 2000, Putin progressively entrenched his authority, employing constitutional amendments and legal strategies to circumvent term limits and extend his rule indefinitely.

Likewise, in Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko was elected president in 1994 under a party-based system. Within a year, he dismantled the existing institutional framework and established a personalist regime. Since then, he has remained in power through successive tenure extensions, steadily consolidating his control over the state apparatus.

In democratic contexts, autocoups are found exclusively in presidential systems. This reflects the institutional leverage enjoyed by presidents, who are directly elected, typically command the armed forces, and may possess the capacity to override or circumvent legislative opposition. By contrast, prime ministers in parliamentary systems are considerably more constrained. Their tenure depends on maintaining legislative confidence and they may be removed through votes of no confidence. Moreover, they often lack direct control over the military, which is institutionally separated from their office. As a result, prime ministers are subject to more frequent leadership turnover and face fewer opportunities to unilaterally extend their mandates. For instance, the United Kingdom saw three prime ministers serve in 2022 alone, while Japan has had 36 prime ministers since 1945—an average of one every two years. In contrast, only 14 presidents have served in the United States over the same period, reflecting greater institutional continuity. These structural distinctions render presidential systems more conducive to autocoups—even within well-established democracies—due to their centralised executive authority and command over the military.

From this analysis, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: The likelihood of autocoup attempts is shaped by regime type, with regimes characterised by concentrated and stable executive power—namely, personalist autocracies and presidential democracies—being the most susceptible, relative to other regime types.

4 Research design

4.1 Methodology

Given the binary nature of the dependent variable—namely, whether an autocoup is attempted in a given country-year—the study initially employs a logistic regression model to investigate the determinants of autocoup attempts. This method enables the identification of statistically significant factors influencing the likelihood of such events, as well as the direction and magnitude of their effects.

Nevertheless, the rarity of autocoup incidents—83 cases out of over 9,000 observations—poses a methodological challenge. Standard maximum likelihood estimation techniques, including conventional logit and probit models, are prone to underestimating the probability of rare events. To mitigate this limitation and improve the robustness of statistical inference, the analysis also employs Firth's Bias-Reduced Penalised Maximum Likelihood Estimation (commonly referred to as Bias-Reduced Logit), as outlined by Firth (1993).

4.2 Data and variables

The primary dataset, which incorporates information on autocoups and regime types, spans the period from 1945 to 2023. However, due to data alignment limitations, the usable data range extends from 1945 to 2018. The dataset comprises approximately 9,400 country-year observations, of which 83 represent recorded autocoup attempts.

Dependent variable

The analysis draws upon the autocoup dataset introduced in Section 2, which covers the period from 1945 to 2023 and includes 83 documented autocoup attempts.

Autocoup attempt: A binary variable indicating whether an autocoup attempt occurred (coded as 1) or did not occur (coded as 0) in each country-year observation.

Independent variables

The principal independent variable in this analysis is regime type, reflecting the central analytical focus of the study. Regime classifications are drawn from the typology developed by Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2014) (GWF dataset), which distinguishes among military, personalist, and dominant-party regimes within autocratic systems. For democratic systems, regimes are categorised as either parliamentary or presidential. A residual category—labelled "other"—captures regimes that are provisional, transitional, or otherwise not easily classified within the primary typology.

In addition to regime type, a range of control variables is included, selected on the basis of established scholarship on the determinants of coups. These controls account for factors such as economic performance, political violence, and the tenure of incumbents. Further controls comprise the level of democracy, population size, and a Cold War dummy variable, which captures temporal variation in the global political environment.

Economic Level: Measured by GDP per capita, this variable reflects the overall economic well-being of a country. Data are sourced from the V-Dem dataset (Fariss et al. 2022) and are expressed in constant 2017 international dollars (PPP, per thousand).

Economic Performance: Operationalised via the Current-Trend (CT) ratio developed by Krishnarajan (2019), this measure compares current GDP per capita with the average of the previous five years. Higher CT values indicate stronger economic growth. Formally:

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

Political violence: Measured using a violence index based on the "actotal" variable from the Major Episodes of Political Violence dataset (Marshall 2005), this index captures both internal and interstate conflict. Scores range from 0 (complete stability) to 18 (maximum instability).

Days in office (log): The natural logarithm of an incumbent leader's cumulative days in office is included as a proxy for power consolidation. Longer tenures are hypothesised to facilitate the conditions necessary for an autocoup. Data are drawn from the Archigos dataset (Goemans, Gled-

itsch, and Chiozza 2009) and the Political Leaders' Affiliation Database (PLAD) (Bomprezzi et al. 2024).

Democratic level: This variable employs the Polity V score to measure the degree of democracy in a country, ranging from -10 (fully autocratic) to +10 (fully democratic). The index, developed by the Centre for Systemic Peace, assesses regime characteristics such as the competitiveness of political participation, executive recruitment, and constraints on executive authority (Marshall 2005).

Population size: The natural logarithm of a country's population is included to account for the potential effects of demographic scale on governance. Larger populations may present more complex administrative challenges and generate greater opposition. Data are sourced from the V-Dem dataset.

Cold War: Following the precedent of earlier studies (C. Thyne and Powell 2014; Derpanopoulos et al. 2016; Dahl and Gleditsch 2023), a dummy variable is included to distinguish the Cold War period (approximately 1960–1990) from the post-Cold War era. This distinction reflects the relative paucity of autocoup events during the Cold War and their increased frequency thereafter.

5 Results and discussion

This study employs logistic regression techniques to examine the structural and contextual factors that influence the probability of autocoup attempts. Given the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable—whether or not an autocoup attempt occurred in a specific country-year—and the rarity of such events (After truncation, 78 out of 9,434 observations) in certain categories, the analysis includes both a standard logit model and a bias-reduced logit model. The latter is particularly well-suited for rare events data, as it corrects for the small-sample bias often encountered with conventional maximum likelihood estimation. Consequently, the interpretation of results prioritises estimates from the bias-reduced model. Odds Ratios (ORs) are reported to facilitate an intuitive understanding of effect sizes.

Table 3: Determinants of Autocoup Attempts(1945-2018)

			Standard Logit			Bias-reduced Logit		
Characteristic	**N**	**Event N**	**log(OR)**[1]	**OR**[1]	**SE**	**log(OR)**[1]	**OR**[1]	**SE**
Constant	9,434	78	-4.7**	0.01**	0.02	-4.6***	0.01***	1.77
Regime Type								
Dominant Party	2,312	19	—	—	—	—	—	—
Personal	1,308	26	0.74**	2.10**	0.65	0.73**	2.08**	0.30
Presidential	1,642	27	1.6***	5.01***	2.42	1.6***	4.87***	0.47
Military	630	2	-0.80	0.45	0.34	-0.62	0.54	0.67
Parliamentary	2,368	1	-1.7	0.18	0.20	-1.4	0.26	0.92
Other	1,174	3	-1.2*	0.30*	0.19	-1.1*	0.34*	0.58
GDP per capita	9,434	78	-0.01	0.99	0.01	-0.01	0.99	0.01
GDP growth trend	9,434	78	0.91	2.49	3.47	0.97	2.64	1.33
Political violence	9,434	78	0.01	1.01	0.07	0.03	1.03	0.06
Log of Population	9,434	78	-0.14	0.87	0.08	-0.15*	0.86*	0.09
Polity V scores	9,434	78	-0.09***	0.91***	0.03	-0.09***	0.91***	0.03
Log of days in office	9,434	78	0.01	1.01	0.13	0.00	1.00	0.12
Cold war			-0.80***	0.45***	0.12	-0.79***	0.45***	0.26

[1] *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
Abbreviations: CI = Confidence Interval, OR = Odds Ratio, SE = Standard Error

Table 3 presents the model estimates. The core hypothesis posits that regime type is a key predictor of autocoup incidence, particularly that personalist regimes and presidential democracies are significantly more prone to such events than dominant-party regimes, which serve as the reference category.

The empirical results provide robust support for this hypothesis. In the bias-reduced model, the odds of an autocoup occurring in a personalist regime are more than twice as high as in a dominant-party regime (OR = 2.08, $p < 0.05$). In presidential democracies, the odds are nearly five times greater (OR = 4.87, $p < 0.01$). To illustrate the magnitude of these effects, I compute predicted probabilities for a prototypical country in the dataset, holding all other covariates at their mean values. In dominant-party regimes, the predicted probability of an autocoup in a given year is approximately 0.99%. In personalist regimes, the probability rises to around 2.0%. In presidential democracies, the likelihood increases further to approximately 4.7%. While these probabilities are low in absolute terms—reflecting the rarity of autocoup events—the relative differences are substantial. Leaders in presidential democracies, for instance, are nearly five times more likely to attempt an autocoup than those in dominant-party systems, holding other factors constant. This

underscores the structural vulnerability of executive-centric political systems, particularly when institutional checks on executive power are weak.

Among other regime types, military and parliamentary democracies do not show statistically significant differences in autocoup likelihood relative to dominant-party regimes. The residual "other" category does reach marginal significance (OR = 0.34, $p < 0.1$), suggesting lower odds, although the heterogeneity within this group warrants cautious interpretation.

Turning to the control variables, several findings warrant closer attention. The Polity V score, which proxies the level of democratic institutionalisation, is significantly associated with reduced odds of autocoup (OR = 0.91, $p < 0.01$). Substantively, this indicates that for each one-point increase in Polity score, the odds of an autocoup decrease by approximately 9%, holding other factors constant. This underscores the protective role of democratic institutions against executive overreach.

The Cold War indicator also emerges as significant (OR = 0.45, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that autocoups were 55% less likely during the Cold War era than in the post-Cold War period. This aligns with historical interpretations that view the Cold War as imposing external constraints on authoritarian innovation, often via superpower influence.

The analysis reveals a statistically significant, albeit marginal, negative relationship between the log of population size and the incidence of autocoups (OR = 0.86, $p < 0.1$). This suggests that as a country's population grows, the odds of an autocoup tend to decrease. This finding aligns with theoretical arguments positing that larger, more populous states may exhibit greater organizational complexity and higher visibility of executive power dynamics, thereby increasing the difficulty and scrutiny associated with an executive power grab.

Conversely, indicators of economic performance—including GDP per capita, GDP growth, and political violence—do not exhibit statistically significant relationships with the outcome variable. Likewise, the log of days in office for the incumbent does not significantly predict autocoup attempts, suggesting that tenure alone is not a sufficient condition for extra-constitutional moves.

In sum, the analysis confirms that regime type—particularly personalist and presidential

systems—is a critical structural condition influencing the likelihood of autocoup attempts. The inclusion of predicted probabilities and percentage changes in odds ratios serves to clarify the substantive significance of these patterns, beyond their statistical robustness. These findings highlight the institutional fragility inherent in regimes where executive authority is highly centralised and inadequately constrained. Additionally, the protective effects of democratic institutions and Cold War-era international structures warrant greater attention in discussion of executive stability and regime resilience.

6 Conclusion

This study provides a quantitative analysis of the determinants of autocoup attempts, addressing a notable gap in the existing literature, which has often been hindered by conceptual imprecision and the absence of systematic empirical data (Baturo and Tolstrup 2022). It advances the central argument that the likelihood of autocoup attempts is shaped significantly by the structural configuration of political power within regimes, operationalised through regime type. Employing both standard logistic regression and Firth's bias-reduced logit model, the analysis demonstrates that personalist autocracies and presidential democracies are markedly more susceptible to autocoup attempts than dominant-party regimes. Specifically, the odds of an autocoup are estimated to be approximately three times higher in personalist autocracies and nearly five times higher in presidential democracies relative to the baseline category.

These findings lend empirical support to the hypothesis that such regime types possess structural vulnerabilities that facilitate extra-constitutional power consolidation by incumbents. In addition to regime type, the analysis identifies several other statistically significant covariates: population size, the degree of democratic institutionalisation, and the broader historical context of the Cold War all exert discernible effects on the probability of autocoup occurrence.

By examining the strategic incentives confronting incumbent leaders across diverse institutional contexts, the study contributes to the conceptual refinement of autocoups and introduces a novel

dataset, which may serve as a foundation for future empirical research. Furthermore, it offers a more systematic and data-driven account of irregular leadership transitions by expanding the analytical scope from irregular ousting to irregular overstaying. Finally, the findings underscore the critical role of regime type in shaping the strategic calculus of incumbents contemplating an autocoup.

Nevertheless, the analysis also underscores several conceptual and methodological challenges that warrant further investigation. Unlike traditional coups—which may occur at various stages of a regime's lifespan and are often subject to recurrence—autocoups appear to follow distinct temporal patterns. For instance, their likelihood may be comparatively low during the initial stages of a leader's tenure, increasing as the conclusion of a constitutional term approaches. Moreover, while a successful extension of tenure may reduce the short-term risk of subsequent attempts, empirical cases such as those of Presidents Putin and Lukashenko suggest that incumbents may engage in serial autocoup behaviour.

To render the analysis tractable, this study adopts the simplifying assumption that an autocoup attempt occurs only once per leadership tenure. While analytically expedient, this assumption highlights the need for future research to explore the temporal dynamics and sequencing of autocoup activity. Such inquiries would usefully complement the present findings by offering deeper insights into the long-term patterns of institutional adaptation, authoritarian durability, and democratic erosion.

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