

Autocoups and Democracy

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Abstract

This chapter investigates the impact of autocoups on political institutions, comparing them with traditional coups through an analysis of variations in Polity V scores. It advances two primary hypotheses: first, that incumbent leaders frequently consolidate power by systematically undermining institutional constraints in the period leading up to an autocoup, resulting in a decline in Polity V scores attributable to the autocoup. Second, unlike traditional coups, which exhibit a “U-shaped” trajectory in Polity V scores, autocoups precipitate a persistent decline in these scores without subsequent recovery. This is attributed to autocoup leaders’ deliberate intent to suppress opposition and dismantle institutional checks and balances to secure prolonged tenure. Employing a country-fixed effects model, this study demonstrates that Polity V scores typically decline following autocoups, mirroring the magnitude of decline observed after traditional coups. However, while traditional coups often lead to an immediate reduction in Polity V scores followed by conditions conducive to recovery over time, autocoups result in sustained democratic erosion. These findings highlight the divergent political trajectories induced by coups and autocoups. This research addresses a critical gap in the empirical analysis of autocoups and contributes to academic and policy discussion by elucidating their detrimental effects, particularly in terms of democratic backsliding and the entrenchment of authoritarian governance.

Keywords: *Coups, Autocoups, Democratization*

1 Introduction

The decline in global political rights and civil liberties, as documented by reports such as Freedom House’s Freedom in the World 2024, marks the eighteenth consecutive year of democratic backsliding worldwide ([Freedom House 2024](#)). This sustained erosion naturally raises the question: What political mechanisms primarily drive the decline in liberties and democratic quality?

One of the primary suspects historically linked to episodes of democratic recession and the decline in global liberties since 2000 has been the coup d’état—the violent, non-constitutional seizure of power. However, an emerging paradox challenges the view of coups as the main contemporary perpetrator of backsliding. Data from the most cited coup datasets suggest a secular decline in the frequency of traditional coups; specifically, the number of coup attempts between 2008 and 2017 represented the lowest ten-year total since at least 1960 ([J. M. Powell and Thyne 2011](#); [Thyne and Powell 2019](#)). Furthermore, despite ongoing scholarly debates, a significant body of empirical literature contends that coups may exert a positive or complex long-term effect on democratization by removing entrenched dictatorships and breaking political logjams ([J. Powell 2014](#); [C. Thyne and Powell 2014](#); [Dahl and Gleditsch 2023](#)). If traditional coups are decreasing and their long-term democratic effect is ambiguous or even restorative, they may not be the principal driver of the current, steady decline in global liberties. This critical gap compels us to search for an alternative, more insidious mechanism of regime erosion.

In sharp contrast to the trend in traditional coups, a similar but distinct political event—the autocoup—has increased notably since 2000 ([Bermeo 2016](#); [Baturu and Tolstrup 2022](#); [Zhu 2024](#)). An autocoup is defined as the extension of an incumbent leader’s tenure in office beyond the originally mandated limit via extra-constitutional manipulation in this study ([Zhu 2024](#)). While both coups and autocoups disrupt established political orders, autocoups involve the insidious erosion of democratic norms from within by the very leader sworn to uphold them. Despite the growing prevalence and conceptual significance of this phenomenon, its specific impact on democracy and regime transitions remains under-examined.

This article undertakes the first empirical investigation into the democratic consequences of autocalups. Its primary objective is to determine whether autocalups, in the current global context, entrench authoritarian rule, facilitate democratization, or have no substantive impact on regime trajectories. Given the conceptual and empirical parallels to calups, a secondary aim is to conduct a focused comparative analysis of their respective effects on democratization to clarify their broader political ramifications.

To address these questions, this study employs a fixed-effects model to evaluate the respective impacts of calups and autocalups on democratic quality, operationalized through Polity V scores. The findings demonstrate a critical divergence:

While both calups and autocalups are associated with an immediate decline in democratic quality, the impact differs significantly over time. Polity V scores affected by calups typically exhibit a notable recovery within two years. Conversely, democratic quality impacted by autocalups shows no such improvement over the same period, indicating a longer and deeper impact on the erosion of democracy.

This study makes two principal contributions to political science. Firstly, it provides the first systematic empirical analysis of the impact of autocalups on democratization, establishing them as a distinct political phenomenon and addressing a critical gap in the literature on democratic backsliding. Secondly, by comparing the effects of calups and autocalups, this research demonstrates the more severe and sustained damage to democratic institutions caused by the latter. This underscores the urgent need to treat autocalups not merely as a variant of executive aggrandizement but as a distinct political pathology warranting focused scholarly and policy attention.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Section 2 examines the mechanisms through which autocalups impact democratic institutions, with particular emphasis on their comparison with traditional calups. Section 3 outlines the research design, methodological approach, and variables employed. Section 4 presents the empirical findings and discusses their broader implications. Section 5 concludes by summarising the key findings and reflecting on their sig-

nificance for understanding and addressing autocoup dynamics.

2 Autocoups: Definition and Measurement of Democratic Impact

2.1 Defining the Irregular Transition

Traditional political science has focused on the **coup d'état**, defined by Powell and Thyne (2011) as “illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive.” This definition focuses on **leadership turnover** and **external disruption**.

In contrast, the **autocoup** refers to the phenomenon of an incumbent leader’s refusal to relinquish power and has received comparatively less scholarly attention, despite its growing frequency. Since the end of the Cold War, while classic coups have declined, these “incumbent retention” or “overstay” strategies have become more frequent (Ginsburg, Melton, and Elkins 2010; Baturo 2014).

To conduct a valuable pioneer analysis, this study formally defines the **autocoup as the extension of an incumbent leader’s tenure in office beyond the originally mandated limit, achieved through extra-constitutional means**.

2.2 Data Compilation

To operationalize this definition, **I compile a new autocoup dataset** based on three complementary sources:

- **Leader Identification:** I utilize the Archigos dataset (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009) and the Political Leaders’ Affiliation Database (PLAD) (Bomprezzi et al. 2024) to identify *de facto* national leaders and their precise time in office (1945–2023).

- **Event Inventory:** I use the Incumbent Takeover dataset ([Baturu and Tolstrup 2022](#)) as the primary inventory of potential autocoup events.
- **Cross-Referencing:** Entries from the Incumbent Takeover dataset are cross-referenced with Archigos and PLAD to isolate only those events that meet the strict definition of an autocoup (illegal tenure **extension**).

2.3 Measuring Impact on Democracy

The scholarly literature on the impact of traditional coups on democratization often evaluates political outcomes through **binary regime classifications** (e.g., democratize, autocratize) ([C. Thyne and Powell 2014](#); [Derpanopoulos et al. 2016](#)). This framework is appropriate for coups, which trigger abrupt leadership replacement and thus easily captured dichotomous shifts.

However, this binary framework is **inadequate for measuring and comparing the impact of autocoups**. An autocoup retains the existing leader, meaning it rarely triggers immediate changes in regime labels. The absence of nominal transition thus **obscures the true consequence: the subversion of institutional constraints that regulate executive power**.

For this reason, to evaluate the political impact of autocoups, a **more sensitive and continuous approach is required**. This study employs the **Polity V score** (from the Polity5 dataset), which ranges from −10 (full autocracy) to +10 (full democracy). This continuous measure enables the detection of **incremental degradation** in executive constraints and political participation, aligning with recent research on subtle democratic backsliding ([Dahl and Gleditsch 2023](#)).

3 Theoretical framework: Autocoups as a Mechanism of Democratic Erosion

3.1 Beyond Traditional Determinants: Rethinking the Drivers of Democratic Decline

Scholars of democratization have long emphasized two broad explanatory traditions for understanding regime trajectories: the structural effects of economic development and the political consequences of coercive power transitions such as coups d'état. Each of these literatures offers valuable insights, but neither sufficiently accounts for the pattern of persistent, widespread democratic backsliding since the early 2000s—a period in which global freedom scores have declined for more than eighteen consecutive years.

Early structural approaches, rooted in modernization theory, argued that rising levels of development foster democratic outcomes by expanding education, generating a middle class, and promoting economic autonomy (Lipset 1959). Robert Barro's cross-national work, for example, finds that improvements in GDP per capita, education levels, and human development indicators predict increases in democratic rights ([Barro 1999](#)). Yet later research complicates this consensus. Using a dataset spanning 167 countries from 1875 to 2004, Miller ([2012](#)) demonstrates that economic development can stabilize authoritarian leaders by reducing the likelihood they are violently removed from office. In this view, modernization may bolster entrenched autocrats as much as it supports democratic transitions. The mixed findings underscore that economic conditions alone cannot explain the contemporary global shift toward illiberal governance.

A second major literature focuses on the role of coups d'état in shaping regime outcomes. Historically, coups have been associated with heightened political instability and democratic decline. Yet post-Cold War evidence is far more ambiguous. Several scholars argue that coups—successful or even failed—can sometimes catalyze democratization, particularly when they remove authoritarian incumbents or pressure elites into reform ([C. Thyne and Powell 2014](#);

[Marinov and Goemans 2013](#)). This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that most post–Cold War coups have been followed by competitive multiparty elections. However, these positive pathways are highly conditional on international incentives, domestic coalitions, and the political motives of coup plotters. As a result, the long-term effects of coups remain inconsistent and unpredictable.

While economic growth and coups remain important pieces of the democratization puzzle, neither can explain the systematic pattern of institutional erosion observed across diverse regions since the early 2000s, particularly given the simultaneous decline in the frequency of traditional coups ([Powell and Thyne 2011](#); [C. Thyne and Hitch 2020](#)). What is more striking—and comparatively understudied—is that many contemporary leaders have prolonged their tenure not by forceful military seizures of power, but by subverting constitutional procedures from within. Prominent examples range from Vladimir Putin and Aleksandr Lukashenko to Xi Jinping, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Nayib Bukele ([Baturu and Elgie 2019](#); [Baturu and Tolstrup 2022](#)). Even established democracies have faced such threats: Donald Trump’s attempt to overturn the 2020 U.S. election results generated widespread debate about the possibility of an American self-coup ([Antonio 2021](#); [Pion-Berlin, Bruneau, and Goetze 2022](#)).

Against this backdrop, the autoup—*in which an incumbent illegally extends their tenure by dismantling constitutional constraints—emerges as a critical yet understudied mechanism of democratic erosion. The analysis of autoup is not only timely but necessary for understanding the most salient pattern of 21st-century regime change: the slow, deliberate, and internal dismantling of democratic institutions by incumbents who seek to remain in power.*

3.2 Why Autoup Matter: Leadership Agency and Authoritarian Intent

Existing democratization research often privileges structural determinants—economic performance, resource endowments, regime type—while treating the preferences of political leaders

as uniform or unobservable. Yet leaders play a decisive role in institutional trajectories, especially in hybrid regimes or weak democracies. Autocratic consolidation frequently reflects deliberate choices by incumbents who seek to extend their tenure and secure immunity from political or legal threats.

Measuring leader intent, however, poses a substantial challenge. Political elites rarely admit authoritarian ambitions openly, and even entrenched autocracies often maintain democratic façades. Nevertheless, autocoups offer a uniquely observable indicator of authoritarian preference. Extending tenure through unconstitutional means is an unmistakable breach of democratic norms. A leader committed to democratic rule could abide by term limits and step down; only a leader with authoritarian ambitions circumvents constitutional constraints.

Thus, an autocoup is analytically significant in two respects. One is the revealed preference, which provides a direct, observable signal of a leader's intention to subvert democracy. The other is the institutional mechanism, which initiates and accelerates processes of institutional decay.

Unlike many political behaviors that are ambiguous or open to interpretation, an autocoup constitutes a clear and deliberate repudiation of the institutional framework of democratic succession.

3.3 The Causal Mechanisms: How Autocoups Damage Democratic Institutions

Autocoups generate democratic erosion through a cumulative, multi-stage process that begins well before the formal tenure extension and persists long after the event. This process can be conceptualized through three mutually reinforcing mechanisms: preparation, execution, and consolidation.

3.3.1 Pre-Autocoup Preparation: Weakening Constraints and Neutralizing Opposition

Democratic decline typically begins before the autocoup itself. To ensure a successful and uncontested breach of constitutional limits, incumbents must first eliminate or neutralize potential veto players. This preparatory stage often involves: purging rival elites and reshuffling security leadership, restricting media freedoms and discrediting independent journalism, weakening judicial autonomy, harassing or outlawing opposition parties, and deploying state resources to entrench patronage networks.

These actions gradually erode the institutional foundations of accountability and transparency. For instance, Alberto Fujimori's 1992 self-coup in Peru—where the Polity V score collapsed from +8 to -4—was preceded by systematic efforts to undermine oversight bodies and neutralize political opponents (Cameron 1998). Such preemptive moves constitute the first wave of democratic degradation: erosion that is deliberate, cumulative, and strategically designed to smooth the path toward unconstitutional tenure extension.

3.3.2 Execution: Violating the Constitutional Order and Destroying Succession Norms

The autocoup itself represents a profound rupture in the democratic order. By bypassing term limits or dissolving representative institutions, incumbents breach the central norm regulating the peaceful rotation of power. Term limits are foundational safeguards against personalist authoritarianism; violating them eliminates a key constraint on executive power and undermines the credibility of constitutional rules.

This rupture produces two major consequences. One is the institutional de-legitimation. By breaking constitutional constraints, the autocoup signals to elites and the public that legal rules are contingent and malleable. The other is precedent for future violations. Once constraints are breached, future leaders (or even the same leader) find it far easier to commit additional violations, accelerating the process of democratic decay.

This moment represents the most visible—and often the most dramatic—expression of

democratic breakdown.

3.3.3 Post-Autocoup Consolidation: Structural Incentives for Repression

After successfully extending tenure, the autocoup leader faces a heightened threat of retribution. Having committed an illegal act, the leader becomes vulnerable to future prosecution or retaliation should they leave office. This creates a powerful incentive for continued authoritarian consolidation.

The leader must maintain a system capable of deterring opponents and preventing any political opening that could threaten their rule. This imperative generates a self-reinforcing authoritarian drift, characterized by: sustained repression of opponents, concentration of executive power, politicization of security forces, permanent weakening of horizontal accountability, and indefinite postponement of democratic restoration.

Thus, democratic decline accelerates not only because institutions are dismantled, but because the leader's survival now depends on maintaining the very system that subverts them. The consolidation phase ensures that democratic erosion is not merely abrupt but persistent.

Given this multi-stage process, the immediate institutional impact of an autocoup is expected to be substantial. Although autocoups differ from coups in that incumbents remain in power, both events produce sharp institutional discontinuities by disrupting established rules of succession and governance.

H1: Autocoups will result in a significant decline in Polity V scores immediately following their occurrence, comparable in magnitude to the effects observed after traditional coups.

This reflects the fact that the autocoup represents an acute violation of constitutional order, producing an immediate deterioration in formal democratic institutions.

3.4 Divergent Long-Term Trajectories: Why Autocoups Are More Damaging Than Coups

Although autocoups and coups can produce similar short-term institutional shocks, their long-term consequences diverge sharply. The literature on coups identifies wide variation in post-coup trajectories: some coups deepen authoritarian rule, while others enable democratic transitions or liberalization. By contrast, autocoups produce a consistent pattern of long-term democratic decline.

Autocoups succeed far more frequently than coups. Globally, approximately 77% of autocoups succeed (Zhu 2024), compared to only about half of traditional coups (Powell and Thyne 2011). Failed coup plotters face imprisonment, exile, or death, whereas failed autocoup leaders often remain in office or complete their term (Baturu 2019). Consequently, autocoup leaders enjoy far greater opportunities to reshape institutions.

Autocoup leaders survive in office significantly longer—on average five additional years—than coup-installed leaders (Zhu 2024). This expanded tenure provides more time to institutionalize authoritarian practices, control elite networks, and eliminate alternative centers of power. In contrast, many coup-installed leaders are ousted before they can make durable institutional changes.

Traditional coups can produce diverse institutional trajectories. Successful coups sometimes facilitate democratic openings, particularly when removing deeply authoritarian incumbents (C. Thyne and Powell 2014; Miller 2016). Failed coups can force incumbents to implement reforms. The motivations of coup plotters also differ: many seek legitimacy and public support, creating incentives to promise democratic restoration.

Autocoups, by contrast, follow a unidirectional logic. The leader has violated constitutional order and therefore cannot credibly commit to liberalization without increasing personal risk. The structural incentives following an autocoup push the leader toward deeper authoritarian consolidation, not reform.

Because autocoups are driven by self-preservation and institutional manipulation rather than political renewal, their long-term impact is systematically negative.

H2: Autocoups generate sustained declines in Polity V scores that do not rebound, whereas traditional coups often follow a U-shaped trajectory characterized by an initial decline followed by gradual democratic improvement.

Thus, whereas coups may trigger democratization under certain conditions, autocoups produce long-lasting—and often irreversible—democratic erosion.

4 Methodology and variables

4.1 Methodology

As outlined above, autocoups are less likely to result in full regime transitions—whether from democracy to autocracy or vice versa. Consequently, evaluating their effects solely in terms of regime change or shifts across democratic thresholds is analytically inappropriate. Instead, this study assesses political change by examining variations in Polity V scores, which capture more subtle shifts in institutional quality and democratic performance.

To differentiate between immediate and medium-term effects, the analysis considers both event-year and two-year impacts of autocoups. The event-year effect is measured as the change in Polity V score in the year of the autocoup relative to the preceding year:

$$Polity_t - Polity_{t-1}$$

The three-year effect captures the change in Polity V score two years after the event, relative to the year of the autocoup:

$$Polity_{t+3} - Polity_t$$

This three-year specification is intended to capture medium-term political developments, as autocrats typically entrench existing power structures rather than inducing immediate systemic change. Short-term fluctuations may not fully reflect the institutional consequences of such events.

To empirically test the hypotheses, the study employs a linear fixed-effects model at the country level. To distinguish between attempted and successful autocrats, separate models are estimated using binary variables that code for autocrat attempts and successes, respectively.

4.2 Variables

The analysis draws upon a global panel of country-year observations spanning from 1950 to 2020, resulting in approximately 9,100 observations. The primary dependent variable is the change in Polity V score, calculated either as a one-year or three-year difference, depending on the model specification. Polity V scores range from -10 (full autocracy) to $+10$ (full democracy). To address missing data caused by transitional codes (-66 , -77 , -88), these values are replaced with the nearest valid Polity score to preserve temporal continuity and reduce bias associated with listwise deletion.

The primary independent variable is the occurrence of an autocrat, as defined in Chapter 2. The dataset includes 83 attempted and 64 successful autocrats. For models analysing attempted autocrats, the variable is coded as 1 in the year of the attempt and 0 otherwise. In the three-year specification, a decay function is applied to measure the persistence of effects, following the approach of Dahl and Gleditsch (2023). To account for temporal diffusion, a half-life of five years is specified, allowing the model to capture both immediate and delayed consequences from the year of the autocrat (y_t) through to four years post-event (y_{t+4}).

In addition, traditional coups are included as a secondary independent variable for two reasons. First, they enable a comparative evaluation of the political consequences of coups versus autocrats. Second, coups and autocrats may occur in close proximity or in causal

sequence, necessitating analytical disaggregation. The coup data are drawn from Powell and Thyne (2011), and are coded in a manner consistent with the autocoup variables—using a binary indicator for one-year effects and a decay function for three-year impacts.

A set of control variables is included to account for alternative explanations. These comprise: economic performance, proxied by GDP growth and GDP per capita; political violence, to capture variations in political stability; and the logarithm of population size, which serves as a proxy for state capacity and scale effects. To mitigate concerns regarding reverse causality, all control variables are lagged by one year, ensuring that their values precede the outcome being measured.

Two additional dummy variables are incorporated:

Non-democracy: This variable captures regime type by distinguishing cases with Polity V scores below -6 (already autocratic and less prone to further decline) and above $+6$ (institutionally resilient to democratic erosion).

Cold War: A temporal dummy variable to account for the geopolitical context, in line with previous studies on the relationship between coups and democratisation (C. Thyne and Powell 2014; Derpanopoulos et al. 2016; Dahl and Gleditsch 2023). It captures broad international trends, such as the stagnation or decline in democratic scores during the Cold War (1960s–1990) and the more pronounced democratising trend after 1990.

5 Results and discussion

This section examines the democratic implications of autocoups by analysing their effects on Polity V scores, both in the immediate aftermath and in the medium term. Table 1 presents four models: Models 1 and 2 report results for attempted autocoups, while Models 3 and 4 pertain to successful autocoups. Within each group, Models 1 and 3 assess immediate effects (in the event year), whereas Models 2 and 4 evaluate medium-term effects (three years after the event).

5.1 Immediate democratic impact

Consistent with the first hypothesis, autocoups and coups are associated with significant immediate declines in Polity V scores. In both Models 1 and 3, autocoups—whether attempted or successful—lead to a statistically significant reduction of approximately 1.3 points in Polity V scores in the event year, all else equal. These effects are comparable in magnitude across both attempted and successful autocoups, suggesting that the democratic damage materialises irrespective of whether the attempt fully succeeds.

Traditional coups are associated with larger immediate declines. Model 1 shows that attempted coups reduce Polity V scores by 1.31 points, while successful coups, in Model 3, lead to a drop of 2.12 points, both significant at the 1% level. These findings confirm that both types of irregular power grabs deliver immediate shocks to democratic institutions, though coups—especially successful ones—inflict greater disruption.

5.2 Medium-term divergence: coups vs. autocoups

In the medium term, however, the political trajectories begin to diverge: while coups are followed by significant improvements in Polity V scores, autocoups continue to exert a negative effect, albeit one that does not reach statistical significance.

Models 2 and 4 evaluate changes in Polity V scores three years after the event. The results indicate that autocoups have no statistically significant effect in the medium term—whether attempted or successful—implying that the initial democratic decline is not followed by subsequent institutional reform or recovery. In contrast, attempted coups are associated with a significant increase of 1.2 points, and successful coups show a particularly strong rebound of 1.87 points, both at the 1% significance level.

These findings provide clear support for the second hypothesis. Whereas coups tend to exhibit a “U-shaped” pattern—with democratic erosion followed by recovery—autocoups demonstrate a consistent, unidirectional decline in democratic quality, with no evidence of rebound.

Table 1: The Impacts on Democratization(1950–2018): Autocoups vs Coups

	Dependent variable: Differences of Polity V scores			
	Attempted		Succeeded	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Autocoup	−1.276*** (0.201)	−0.338 (0.322)	−1.290*** (0.226)	−0.130 (0.360)
Coup	−1.312*** (0.091)	1.203*** (0.127)	−2.120*** (0.124)	1.868*** (0.183)
GDP per Capita	−0.003** (0.001)	−0.009*** (0.002)	−0.003** (0.001)	−0.010*** (0.002)
Economic Trend	−0.428 (0.277)	−0.563 (0.480)	−0.329 (0.275)	−0.635 (0.480)
Log Population	0.178** (0.070)	0.755*** (0.122)	0.188*** (0.070)	0.734*** (0.122)
Political Violence	0.015 (0.014)	0.033 (0.024)	0.012 (0.014)	0.033 (0.024)
Non-Democracy	0.809*** (0.062)	−0.776*** (0.109)	0.797*** (0.062)	−0.775*** (0.109)
Cold War	−0.235*** (0.063)	−0.092 (0.109)	−0.224*** (0.063)	−0.116 (0.109)
Observations	9,104	9,104	9,104	9,104
R ²	0.047	0.028	0.055	0.030
Adjusted R ²	0.029	0.009	0.036	0.011
F Statistic	55.436***	32.690***	64.970***	34.462***

Note:

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

The results suggest that autocoups exert their impact primarily in the short term, as reflected in the immediate drop in Polity V scores, while offering no potential for democratic revitalisation in the medium term. This contrasts with coups, which, although initially disruptive, sometimes serve as catalysts for institutional renewal, particularly in cases where they are followed by electoral processes or popular mobilisation.

These findings reinforce the notion that autocoups function to entrench incumbents, undermining constitutional safeguards and consolidating executive power. By contrast, coups—particularly those that displace entrenched regimes—may open space for institutional realignment or liberalisation, depending on the post-coup political context.

The models incorporate a range of control variables to isolate the effects of coups and autocoups:

GDP per capita is negatively and significantly associated with changes in Polity V scores across all models. This counterintuitive negative association may reflect the limited potential for democratic gains in already high-income democracies, where Polity V scores are near their ceiling.

Log of population size is positively and significantly associated with Polity score changes, suggesting that larger states may possess greater institutional adaptability or reform potential.

The results for non-democratic regimes (defined as those with Polity V scores below -6) reveal a temporal asymmetry in their effects on democratic outcomes. In the event-year models (Models 1 and 3), non-democratic regimes are associated with significant positive changes in Polity V scores. This likely reflects cases where short-term liberalisation or reform efforts follow leadership crises or institutional ruptures, producing modest democratic gains even within authoritarian contexts. By contrast, in the three-year models (Models 2 and 4), the effect reverses direction: non-democratic regimes are associated with significant declines in Polity V scores over the medium term. This pattern suggests that early signs of liberalisation often fail to consolidate and may be followed by renewed authoritarian entrenchment. In essence, while non-democratic regimes may exhibit initial democratic openings—whether symbolic or

procedural—these gains are frequently short-lived, with longer-term trajectories reverting to autocratic norms. This dynamic underscores the fragility of democratic progress in authoritarian contexts, where reforms introduced in the aftermath of institutional disruption are often superficial or strategically instrumental, lacking the structural support required for sustained democratisation.

Cold War context is statistically significant only in the event-year models, where it correlates with a decline in Polity V scores, reflecting the broader global pattern of democratic suppression during the Cold War period.

Political violence and economic growth do not show consistent or significant effects, indicating that immediate democratic outcomes are more sensitive to regime characteristics and structural factors than to short-term economic or security conditions.

Overall, the empirical results offer robust support for both hypotheses. Autocoups and coups both lead to significant immediate declines in democratic quality, with coups inflicting greater short-term damage. In the medium term, coups are often followed by democratic recovery, whereas autocoups result in persistent democratic erosion with no evidence of rebound.

These findings suggest that autocoups represent a particularly insidious form of democratic backsliding, less dramatic than coups but ultimately more damaging in their long-term effects. They reinforce the need for greater scholarly and policy attention to constitutional manipulations by incumbents, which, although often gradual and legally framed, can produce lasting democratic decay.

5.3 Robustness tests

To assess the robustness of the main findings, a series of alternative model specifications were estimated. The results confirm that the core conclusions remain stable under these variations.

First, the operationalisation of the autocoup variable was modified: the decay function used in the baseline analysis was replaced with a binary indicator distinguishing between attempted

and successful autocrats. Additionally, the broad ‘non-democracy’ category was disaggregated into more specific regime types—military, personalist, presidential, parliamentary, and ‘other’—with dominant-party regimes serving as the reference category. This classification mirrors the approach used in the determinants analysis of autocrats presented in earlier chapters. The results of these robustness models are presented in Models 5 to 8 in Table 2.

Consistent with the main models, autocrats remain significantly associated with negative changes in Polity V scores in the short term (Models 5 and 7), with coefficients of -1.236 and -1.234 , respectively (both significant at the 1% level). However, in the three-year models (Models 6 and 8), the effect becomes statistically insignificant, indicating that the negative effect of autocrats is immediate but not sustained over time.

By contrast, coups continue to show a distinct “U-shaped” effect. In the event-year models (Models 5 and 7), coups are associated with significant declines in Polity V scores (-1.366 and -2.190), both at the 1% level. Yet in the three-year models (Models 6 and 8), the effect reverses direction: coups are now associated with large positive changes in Polity V scores ($+1.240$ and $+1.712$, also significant at the 1% level). This confirms the earlier interpretation that while coups may cause immediate democratic disruption, they are often followed by democratic recovery in the medium term.

The disaggregated regime type variables provide additional insights. Military regimes show significant positive effects in the event-year models (Models 5 and 7), with coefficients of $+0.602$ and $+0.574$, but become negative and significant in the three-year models (-0.545 and -0.584 in Models 6 and 8). This reversal suggests that initial post-event liberalisation in military regimes is not sustained, and may even regress.

Personalist regimes are consistently associated with negative and significant effects in the three-year models (Models 6 and 8: -0.532 and -0.526), but not in the two-year models, suggesting that their democratic erosion becomes more evident over time.

Presidential and parliamentary democracies follow a similar pattern: both show significant negative effects in the short term (Models 5 and 7), and positive, statistically significant effects

Table 2: The Impact of Autocoups on Democratization: Binary Autocoups

	Dependent variable: Differences of Polity V scores			
	Attempted		Succeeded	
	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Autocoup	−1.236*** (0.200)	−0.148 (0.359)	−1.234*** (0.226)	−0.057 (0.402)
Coup	−1.366*** (0.091)	1.240*** (0.157)	−2.190*** (0.123)	1.712*** (0.215)
GDP per Capita	−0.003** (0.001)	−0.010*** (0.002)	−0.003** (0.001)	−0.010*** (0.002)
Economic Trend	−0.387 (0.277)	−0.569 (0.482)	−0.282 (0.276)	−0.629 (0.482)
Log Population	0.247*** (0.072)	0.890*** (0.126)	0.262*** (0.072)	0.879*** (0.126)
Political Violence	0.015 (0.014)	0.044* (0.024)	0.012 (0.014)	0.046* (0.024)
Regime: Military	0.602*** (0.101)	−0.545*** (0.177)	0.574*** (0.101)	−0.584*** (0.178)
Personal	−0.042 (0.094)	−0.532*** (0.164)	−0.065 (0.094)	−0.526*** (0.164)
Presidential	−0.576*** (0.091)	0.399** (0.158)	−0.578*** (0.090)	0.381** (0.158)
Parliamentary	−0.475*** (0.105)	0.965*** (0.182)	−0.468*** (0.104)	0.966*** (0.182)
Other	0.999*** (0.114)	1.094*** (0.199)	1.013*** (0.114)	1.115*** (0.199)
Cold War	−0.168*** (0.064)	−0.002 (0.111)	−0.156** (0.063)	−0.011 (0.111)
Observations	9,036	9,036	9,036	9,036
R ²	0.060	0.033	0.068	0.033
Adjusted R ²	0.041	20 0.014	0.049	0.014
F Statistic	47.043***	25.244***	53.742***	25.364***

Note:

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

in the medium term (Models 6 and 8). For example, parliamentary democracies are associated with a drop of $-0.475/-0.468$ in the short term but show a gain of $+0.965/0.966$ over three years. This pattern supports the idea that democratic institutions may initially be shaken by political disruption but recover when institutional mechanisms are strong.

“Other” regimes (likely transitional or provisional systems) show consistently large and positive effects across all models, ranging from $+0.999$ to $+1.115$, all significant at the 1% level. This implies that these regimes tend to transition toward more democratic forms over both short and medium time frames.

Several control variables also behave consistently with the baseline models. GDP per capita is negatively and significantly associated with changes in Polity V scores across all models, again likely reflecting ceiling effects in advanced democracies with limited room for improvement. Log of population is positively and significantly related to Polity changes, reinforcing earlier interpretations that larger states may possess greater reform potential or be more likely to register changes in democratic performance. Political violence becomes statistically significant only in the three-year models (Models 6 and 8), where it has a small positive effect ($+0.044$, $+0.046$), suggesting that prolonged unrest may precede some form of institutional response or democratic opening. The Cold War variable is significant only in the event-year models (Models 5 and 7), where it is associated with small negative effects (-0.168 and -0.156), consistent with broader patterns of democratic suppression during the Cold War period.

These robustness models confirm the main findings while offering additional nuance. These results underscore the importance of both regime context and temporal scope in evaluating the consequences of irregular power grabs. Autocoups, unlike coups, represent a consistently negative force for democratic institutions—one that undermines without paving the way for recovery.

6 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the impact of autocrats on democratic institutions by analysing changes in Polity V scores, with a comparative focus on traditional coups. Two key hypotheses guided the analysis: first, that autocrats are associated with consistent declines in democratic quality, particularly in the short term; and second, that while coups often generate initial disruptions, they tend to produce a “U-shaped” effect, marked by subsequent democratic recovery or even advancement in the medium term.

The empirical results offer strong support for these hypotheses. Across multiple model specifications, autocrats—whether attempted or successful—exhibit significant negative effects on Polity V scores in the event year, but these effects do not persist into the medium term. In contrast, coups are associated with significant democratic improvement three years after the event, despite an initial decline. This pattern is robust across models incorporating disaggregated regime types, alternative lag structures, and extended time horizons.

The analysis further reveals important variation across regime types. Military and personalist regimes, while sometimes exhibiting modest democratic gains in the immediate aftermath, tend to experience declines in Polity V scores over time, suggesting a return to entrenched authoritarianism. Presidential and parliamentary democracies, by contrast, initially register democratic decline but tend to recover within three years—consistent with institutional resilience. Notably, transitional or provisional regimes (“other” types) display consistently strong democratic gains, underscoring their potential for reform during periods of flux.

The findings carry several theoretical and policy-relevant implications. While coups are widely recognised as pivotal events in the study of regime change, autocrats deserve greater scholarly attention. Unlike coups, which may at times catalyse democratic transitions, autocrats represent a systematically anti-democratic mechanism, typically employed to erode checks on executive power and extend incumbents’ rule. Moreover, as shown in Chapter 4, autocrat leaders tend to retain power for longer periods—nearly a decade on average—compared

to less than seven years for coup-installed leaders, implying more durable institutional consequences.

This chapter also advances the methodological literature by emphasising the importance of temporal framing. Many political shocks—particularly autocoups—are preceded by elite purges, electoral manipulation, or institutional weakening. Consequently, focusing solely on post-event changes risks overlooking the cumulative nature of democratic decline. The findings thus support a more longitudinal and process-oriented approach to studying regime erosion.

Nevertheless, limitations remain. Notably, coups and autocoups occasionally occur in close temporal proximity, making it difficult to disentangle their respective contributions to changes in Polity V scores. Future research should seek to better isolate these overlapping effects, perhaps through finer-grained event sequencing or qualitative case tracing.

In sum, this chapter reinforces the view that autocoups are a critical yet underexplored driver of democratic backsliding. Their often-subtle execution belies their long-term consequences. As such, they warrant continued empirical scrutiny and deeper integration into both the comparative democratisation literature and policy frameworks concerned with defending constitutional governance.

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