

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](#); [Bature 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 autocoups. Its primary objective is to determine whether autocoups, 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 coups, 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 coups and autocoups on democratic quality, operationalized through Polity V scores. The findings demonstrate a critical divergence:

While both coups and autocoups are associated with an immediate decline in democratic quality, the impact differs significantly over time. Polity V scores affected by coups typically exhibit a notable recovery within two years. Conversely, democratic quality impacted by autocoups 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 autocoups 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 coups and autocoups, this research demonstrates the more severe and sustained damage to democratic institutions caused by the latter. This underscores the urgent need to treat autocoups 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 autocoups impact democratic institutions, with particular emphasis on their comparison with traditional coups. 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 Theoretical Framework: Disaggregating Irregular Transitions

The scholarly literature on irregular transitions has traditionally focused on coups d'état, evaluating political outcomes through binary regime classifications—whether countries democratize, autocratize, or remain stable ([C. Thyne and Powell 2014](#); [Derpanopoulos et al. 2016](#)). This framework is appropriate for traditional coups, which trigger abrupt leadership replacement and elite rearrangement, making the political disruption easily captured through dichotomous shifts.

However, this binary framework is inadequate for the autocoup, an increasingly prevalent form of irregular power consolidation. An autocoup occurs when an incumbent leader extends their tenure beyond constitutionally mandated limits through extra-constitutional means. Unlike a classic coup d'état, an autocoup retains the existing leader and governing coalition, 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 approach is required. This study employs the Polity V score (from the Polity5 dataset), which ranges from -10 to $+10$. This continuous measure enables the detection of incremental degradation in executive constraints and political participation, aligning with research on subtle democratic backsliding ([Dahl and Gleditsch 2023](#)).

2.1 Mechanisms of democratic damage in autogolpes

Autogolpes pose a distinct and acute threat to democratic institutions because they require the incumbent to systematically dismantle the political rules *before* and *after* the decisive act. The democratic damage unfolds through three reinforcing mechanisms:

The decline associated with autogolpes begins before the formal extension of tenure. To ensure a successful and uncontested breach of constitutional limits, incumbents must first neutralize potential veto players and dismantle oversight mechanisms. This preparation involves purging rival elites, restricting media freedoms, weakening judicial independence, and harassing opposition parties (e.g., Peru's 1992 autogolpe, where the Polity score collapsed from 8 to -4 following the dissolution of Congress ([Cameron 1998](#))). These actions constitute the first wave of democratic erosion.

Autogolpes are, once they are executed, fundamentally, an unlawful violation of existing constitutional constraints. Term limits are foundational safeguards; when incumbents circumvent them, they destroy one of the most important institutional protections against authoritarianism. The act itself permanently weakens the credibility of legal norms, establishing a precedent that facilitates future violations by subsequent leaders.

After the Event, following the illegal extension of power, leaders face a powerful structural incentive for long-term control. The committed constitutional crime exposes the leader to the threat of future prosecution and retribution should they be removed. This structural necessity differentiates autogolpe leaders from coup-installed leaders; the former cannot credibly commit to liberalization without significantly increasing their personal risk. The result is a self-reinforcing authoritarian drift, characterized by sustained repression and the indefinite postponement of democratic restoration.

The immediate impact of the autogolpe event, despite the differences in preparation (gradual vs. abrupt), is thus hypothesized to be comparable to that of a traditional coup:

H1: Autogolpes will result in a significant decline in Polity V scores immediately following

their occurrence, in a manner comparable to the effects observed in traditional coups.

2.2 Comparative long-term outcomes: autocoups vs. coups

Despite the shared feature of immediate institutional disruption, autocoups and traditional coups produce markedly different long-term political outcomes.

The literature shows that coups produce highly variable consequences. Several studies argue that coups can act as catalysts for political renewal, especially when they remove entrenched authoritarian leaders or aim to restore constitutional order ([C. Thyne and Powell 2014](#); [Miller 2016](#)). 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](#)).

Coup leaders, taking power from outside the existing executive, may feel incentives to promise reforms to build legitimacy and mitigate elite resistance. This dynamic supports the cited U-shaped trajectory: an initial sharp decline in democratic quality followed by a gradual rebound toward the mean.

Autocoups, however, follow a fundamentally different logic. Because the act is inherently anti-democratic and self-serving, the leader cannot later pursue liberalization without endangering their own political survival. The structural incentives created by the successful autocoup are thus to centralize power, maintain long-term coercive control, and prohibit political openings. The result is a unidirectional, durable authoritarian trajectory. Democratic decline associated with autocoups tends not only to be sharp but also sustained, with little evidence of recovery even in the medium term.

This difference leads to the second hypothesis:

H2: Autocoups produce significant declines in Polity V scores that typically do not re-

bound, whereas traditional coups often exhibit a U-shaped trajectory, with initial deterioration followed by gradual democratic improvement.

3 Methodology and variables

3.1 Methodology

As outlined above, autogovernments 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 autogovernments. The event-year effect is measured as the change in Polity V score in the year of the autogovernment 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 autogovernment:

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

This three-year specification is intended to capture medium-term political developments, as autogovernments 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 autocracies, separate models are estimated using binary variables that code for autocoup attempts and successes, respectively.

3.2 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 autocoup, as defined in Chapter 2. The dataset includes 83 attempted and 64 successful autocracies. For models analysing attempted autocracies, 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 autocoup (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 autocracies. Second, coups and autocracies 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.

4 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).

4.1 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 autocrups, 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.

4.2 Medium-term divergence: coups vs. autocrups

In the medium term, however, the political trajectories begin to diverge: while coups are followed by significant improvements in Polity V scores, autocrups 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 autocrups 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—autocrups demonstrate a consistent, unidirectional decline in democratic quality, with no evidence of rebound.

The results suggest that autocrups 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.

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

These findings reinforce the notion that autocracies 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 autocracies:

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.

4.3 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 autocoups. 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 autocoups presented in earlier chapters. The results of these robustness models are presented in Models 5 to 8 in Table 2.

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	14 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

Consistent with the main models, autogovernments 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 autogovernments 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 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.

5 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the impact of autocoups 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 autocoups 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, autocoups—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, autocoups deserve greater scholarly attention. Unlike coups, which may at times catalyse democratic transitions, autocoups represent a systematically anti-democratic mechanism, typically employed to erode checks on executive power and extend incumbents’ rule. Moreover, as shown in Chapter 4, autocoup 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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