

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

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Abstract

This study aims to clarify the concept of overstay coups, focusing on power extensions by incumbent leaders. By distinguishing overstay coups from the broader, more ambiguous concepts of self-coups or autocoups, which encompass both executive power aggrandizement and power extension, this research introduces a refined understanding of these specific political events.

The research involves coding overstay coup events and compiling a comprehensive dataset covering the period from 1945 to the present. Using this dataset, two detailed case studies provide qualitative insights into the dynamics and outcomes of overstay coups. Additionally, a regression analysis identifies the determinants of overstay coup attempts, shedding light on the factors that influence incumbents' decisions to extend their power illegitimately.

The findings contribute to the existing literature by providing a clearer conceptual framework and empirical evidence on overstay coups. This research enhances our understanding of the mechanisms and motivations behind power extensions by incumbent leaders, and it examines the implications for democratic resilience, democratic backsliding, democratic breakdown, personalization of power, and autocratic deterioration. The insights gained from this study inform policy and theoretical discussions on political stability and the challenges facing contemporary democracies.

Keywords: Coups, Autocoups, Political Leadership

1 Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2 Autocoups: A literature review and clarification of definitions

Compared to coups, which are clearly defined and widely accepted as illegal attempts by elites within the ruling group to overthrow the leadership (Powell and Thyne 2011), the concept of autocoups (also known as autogolpes and self-coups) suffers from a lack of consistency and clarity. This ambiguity hinders our understanding and studying of a critical phenomenon in irregular power transitions, hence necessitates addressing two key issues: terminology and core characteristics.

2.1 Choosing the Right Term

The most common terms in autocoup literature are *self-coup* or *autogolpe* in Spanish (Przeworski et al. 2000; Maxwell A. Cameron 1998a; Bermeo 2016; Helmke 2017; Marsteintredet and Malamud 2019). The usage gained academic prominence after Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori dissolved Congress, temporarily suspended the constitution, and ruled by decree in 1992 (Mauceri 1995; Maxwell A. Cameron 1998b). It is commonly defined as “a temporary suspension of the constitution and dissolution of congress by the executive, who rules by decree until new legislative elections and a referendum can be held to ratify a political system with broader executive power” (Maxwell A. Cameron 1998a, 220). However, as Marsteintredet and Malamud (2019) point out, the term “self-coup” can be misleading, as it implies a coup against oneself, which is inaccurate since it is not self-directed but to other state institutions or apparatus.

Another approach to describe coups staged by incumbents is to use coups with adjectives or modifiers, such as presidential coup, executive coup, constitutional coup, electoral coup, judicial coup, slow-motion coup, soft coup, and parliamentary coup (Marsteintredet and Malamud 2019). While these terms can be helpful in specific power expansions or power grabs perpetrated by incumbents, the proliferation of such terms can add to the overall confusion rather than providing clarification. Essentially, most of these coups with adjective terms primarily focus on the specific methods used by incumbents to expand their power or lessen restrictions, often failing to clearly

identify the incumbent leader as the perpetrator. Even in specific contexts, using a term like “constitutional autocoup” instead of “constitutional coup” would be more informative due to its explicit identification of the incumbent as the actor.

The third alternative involves terms like “incumbent takeover” or “executive takeover,” referring to “an event perpetuated by a ruling executive that significantly reduces the formal and/or informal constraints on his/her power” (Baturu and Tolstrup 2022, 374) based on earlier research (Svolik 2014). This term identifies the perpetrator (incumbent) and the nature of the event (power grab). However, “incumbent takeover” lacks clarity regarding the illegal or illegitimate nature of these actions. While “coup” clearly denotes the illegality of leadership ousters, replacing it with “takeover” diminishes the severity. Therefore, “incumbent takeover” cannot be a direct counterpart to “coup” due to its ambiguity concerning illegality.

Based on this analysis, “autocoup” emerges as the most accurate and appropriate term to describe situations where incumbents orchestrate actions to extend and/or expand their power through illegitimate means.

2.2 Beyond Terminology: Emphasizing Power Extension

While terminology is important, another issue arises with the previous definition of autocoups: should we emphasize power expansion or power extension?

- **Power Expansion:** This refers to situations where an executive branch expands its power beyond its original boundaries, often by encroaching on the authority of other branches like the legislature or judiciary.
- **Power Extension:** This refers to situations where a leader extends their tenure in office beyond the originally mandated term limits.

Existing definitions of self-coup or autocoup sometimes touch upon power extensions, but they primarily focus on scenarios where the executive seizes more power from other branches. This emphasis on power expansion has several drawbacks.

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

Secondly, emphasizing power expansion raises issues regarding the purpose of launching an autocoup. If, as Maxwell A. Cameron (1998a) defined, a self-coup is merely about forcing the congress or judiciary to ratify broader executive power without extending the leader's time in office, the leader faces significant risks once their term expires. Once their term expires, they could face legal or political repercussions for the autocoup itself. Also, it is strategically unwise to leave behind an overly powerful executive branch that a successor could potentially abuse. While the term "self-coup" gained prominence from the 1992 Fujimori case in Peru, which initially involved seizing power from other institutions, it's important to note that Fujimori ultimately extended his term limits through constitutional amendments. Therefore, what matters more is power extension.

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

Therefore, this study argues that a more accurate definition of autocoops should prioritize power extension as the core characteristic. While power expansion can sometimes accompany autocoops, it is not always the defining factor. The key is the leader's attempt to remain in office beyond their legal term limits, often through potentially illegitimate means.

In light of this discussion, we formally define an autocoup as the practice of current political leaders extending their time in office beyond their originally mandated term limits, often achieved

through seemingly legal means like constitutional amendments or referendums, but ultimately illegitimate in essence.

- **Focus on Power Extension:** While autocoups might involve power expansion (taking more power from other branches), their primary characteristic is extending the incumbent's term in office.
- **Illegality or Illegitimacy:** Autocoups often employ seemingly legal mechanisms like referendums or constitutional amendments, but their essence is illegitimate.

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