

Autocoups: Determinants and Outcomes of Irregular Overlays of Political Leadership

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Abstract

This study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the factors influencing political leaders' decisions to either voluntarily step down or attempt to overstay in power. By employing a sample selection model, the research explores the effects of economic performance, the post-Cold War era, regime types, and levels of democracy on overstay attempts. Furthermore, it examines the influence of incumbency advantages on the likelihood of successful overstay attempts. Through a quantitative analysis based on a new dataset of overstates, this study contributes to the existing literature by offering valuable insights into the determinants of overstay attempts and their outcomes.

Keywords: Coups, Autocoups, Political Leadership

1 Introduction

When political leaders assume power, they can exit in three main ways: being compelled to leave office before their term expires (ousted or forced to resign), successfully completing their full term and stepping down¹, or overstaying in power through illegitimate means.

Unsurprisingly, irregular exits, particularly the first type, have garnered significant academic attention. According to Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza (2009), out of 374 leaders who exited irregularly, 246 were ousted through coups, accounting for 65.8% of these cases. Frantz and Stein (2016) shows that coup-related exits account for roughly one-third of all exits in autocracies, surpassing any other type, including regular transitions. Given the prevalence of coups as the primary form of irregular exits, much research has focused on this phenomenon.

While previous literature has primarily concentrated on irregular entries and exits, there has been comparatively less attention given to **irregular overstays**, where leaders overstay their term despite legal requirements such as term limits, losing elections, or impeachment. Therefore, it is worth studying irregular overstays to analyse why some political leaders exit regularly according to their term limits, while others attempt to overstay in office, and why some leaders successfully overstay in power, while others fail in their attempts. The significance of this topic is based on the following reasons:

Firstly, coups have become less common since 2000. Since 1990, there has been a significant decline in cases of incumbent political leaders being ousted before their legal term limits. The risk of coups, for example, has been remarkably reduced (Bermeo 2016; Thyne and Powell 2019). As shown in Table 1, the top 10 least frequent years of coups, except for 1950, are all after 1990, while the top 10 most frequent years of coups, except for 1991, are all before 1990.

However, irregular overstays have become more frequent since 2000. In July 2020, Russia overwhelmingly passed a referendum amending the Russian Constitution, allowing President Vladimir Putin, who has been in power since 1999, to remain in office until 2036². Similarly, in March

¹For lifelong rulers, such as those in monarchies or de facto hereditary regimes, leaders typically exit power only upon their death.

²Referendum In Russia Passes, Allowing Putin To Remain President Until 2036: <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/>

2018, China’s National People’s Congress (NPC) removed the two-term limit on the presidency from China’s Constitution, effectively enabling Xi Jinping to potentially remain in power indefinitely³. Even the United States, often considered a well-established democracy, faced a potential risk of self-coup following the 2020 election (Antonio 2021; Pion-Berlin, Bruneau, and Goetze 2022). Previous studies indicate that roughly 20 to 30 percent of political leaders have extended their terms through various means (Ginsburg, Melton, and Elkins 2010; Baturu 2014). More recent research highlights an even more concerning trend, showing that since 2000, approximately half of the rulers in non-democratic countries have attempted to overstay in their positions (Versteeg et al. 2020). Alarming, a considerable number of these overstay attempts have been successful.

Table 1: Coups frequency by year (1950-2023)

Least Frequency Years	Least Counts	Most Frequency Years	Most Counts
1998	1	1966	18
2020	1	1963	16
2017	1	1975	16
2016	1	1965	15
2013	1	1991	14
1950	2	1962	14
2009	2	1960	12
2002	2	1978	12
2005	2	1981	11
2011	2	1961	11

Source: GIC dataset

Secondly, while the negative outcomes of coups, such as societal turmoil and democratic decline, have been widely discussed, the negative outcomes of irregular overstays have not received

01/886440694/referendum-in-russia-passes-allowing-putin-to-remain-president-until-2036, accessed on October 15, 2022.

³China’s Xi allowed to remain ‘president for life’ as term limits removed: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-43361276>, accessed on Octbor 15, 2022.

enough attention, despite being at least as significant. Although coups can sometimes end the worst regimes or chaos and have been debated for their potential benefits to democracy ([Derpanopoulos et al. 2016, 2017](#); [Miller 2016](#); [Lumjiak et al. 2018](#)), for example, the coup in Niger in 2010 resolved a constitutional crisis, ended turmoil, and promoted democracy ([Derpanopoulos et al. 2016](#)).

Irregular oversteps, however, are typically accompanied by the abuse of power, defiance of legitimate authority, violation of the rule of law, destruction of political conventions, and damage to checks and balances. Successful oversteps almost always lead to democratic backsliding or autocratic deterioration. Even unsuccessful oversteps often spark protests, strikes, riots, insurgencies, rebellions, coups, or, even worse, civil wars. As oversteps undermine formal institutions or violate informal norms of power transition, they significantly increase the risk of irregular power transitions in the future. Research indicates that since 1945, approximately 62 percent of irregular stayed leaders in non-democratic countries were either ousted or assassinated while in office ([Baturu 2019](#)).

Despite its high frequency and severe consequences, irregular oversteps has received comparatively less attention compared to the extensive research conducted on the irregular exits of political leaders since the early 2000s ([Thyne and Powell 2019](#)). The limited existing studies on irregular oversteps have primarily relied on case studies ([Cameron 1998](#); [Antonio 2021](#); [Pion-Berlin, Bruneau, and Goetze 2022](#)), and few have been focused on quantitative analyses.

This study aims to address these issues and contribute in three areas. Firstly, it clarifies and redefines the concept of autocoups in terms of irregular oversteps, establishing a new dataset of autocoups since 1945. Secondly, it highlights the significant academic value of autocoups in the context of irregular oversteps, similar to the value of coups in irregular entry and exits. Thirdly, it enhances the existing body of knowledge by conducting a quantitative analysis on the determinants of autocoups.

The subsequent section will provide a comprehensive overview of the definition and typology of the dataset on oversteps. This will be followed by a presentation of relevant theories and hypotheses that examine the factors influencing overstep attempts and their outcomes. The research design will

be outlined in Part IV, detailing the data and methodology employed to test the hypotheses. The results of the analysis will be discussed in Part V, providing a thorough examination of the findings. Finally, the paper will conclude in Part VI, summarizing the key insights gained from the study and suggesting avenues for future research.

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