

# **Leadership Transitions and Survival: Coups, Autocoups, and Power Dynamics**

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## **Abstract**

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All errors and faults are my own.

# Abstract

This dissertation examines the dynamics of irregular power transitions, particularly coups and autocoups, and their influence on leader survival. It highlights the critical role of power dynamics, shaped by **regime type**, in determining coup success rates and attempt frequency. Utilizing a **double probit model with sample selection**, the study reveals that expected coup success significantly influences attempts, with military regimes facing a heightened vulnerability due to their power structure.

While often understudied, autocoups are shown to have a substantial impact on democratic trends. This research introduces a refined definition of autocoups alongside a novel dataset encompassing events from 1945 to 2022, enabling a more robust quantitative analysis.

Employing survival analysis, the study compares the longevity of leaders who rise to power through coups versus autocoups. The findings demonstrate that coup-installed leaders face a significantly shorter tenure and higher risk of removal. This contrasts with autocoup leaders who manipulate the system to extend their rule, suggesting the potential for autocoups to incentivize power grabs and contribute to democratic backsliding.

This work contributes significantly to the political science literature by:

- Defining key concepts: It establishes a clear definition of autocoups, a previously understudied phenomenon.
- Introducing a novel dataset: This dataset enables researchers to conduct more comprehensive quantitative analyses of autocoups.



- Establishing a general framework: The framework provides a comparative approach to studying the dynamics of irregular power transitions and their impact on democratic stability.

**keywords:** *Coups, Autocoups, Power transitions, Leadership Survival*

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 Research question

Irregular power transitions, marked by a disregard for constitutional procedures, are a critical area of study in political science. They not only disrupt established rules but often require unconstitutional tactics to secure power. Furthermore, these transitions can inspire copycat behaviour among other ambitious leaders.

Despite their central role in political science and the extensive research conducted on irregular power transitions, a long-standing question continues to intrigue political scientists: *Why are some leaders ousted before their terms expire, while others complete their full terms or even overstay beyond their originally mandated limits?* In other words, why do some leaders survive for decades while others last for only years, months, or even days? This dissertation focuses on this question and seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis, dedicated to understanding how leaders come to power through unconstitutional means and what factors determine the duration of a leader's rule following an irregular ascent.

## 1.2 Analyses on coups and autcoups in a general framework

When discussing irregular power transitions, the concepts that often come to mind are irregular entries or exits, such as coups, assassinations, rebellions, protests, and foreign interventions. Among these methods, coups hold a prominent position due to their frequent occurrence. According to the Archigos dataset (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009), from 1945 to 2015, there were approximately 145 instances of irregular leader exits, with coups<sup>1</sup> accounting for more than half (79 leaders). The often-cited Global Instances of Coups (GIC)<sup>2</sup> dataset (J. M. Powell and Thyne 2011) records even more leaders (245 cases) removed by coups from 1950 to 2023.

Given their prevalence and substantial influence on political systems, coups have been extensively studied, particularly since 2000 (Thyne and Powell 2019). Consequently, the concept of a coup is comparatively clear and widely accepted in academic circles. Many scholars, including this study, follow the definition by J. M. Powell and Thyne (2011), which describes coups as “illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive... [a coup is successful] if the perpetrators seize and hold power for at least seven days” (P. 252). Although debates persist, two elements are clear: first, the perpetrators are elites within the ruling group, and the victims of coups are incumbent executive leaders. Second, the strategy or aim of a coup involves completely removing the incumbents, not merely seizing part of their power or forcing them to concede on specific policies. Beyond defining coups, several datasets have been developed for quantitative analyses, such as the Global Instances of Coups (J. M. Powell and Thyne 2011), the Cline Centre Coup d’État Project Dataset (Peyton et al. 2024), and the Colpus Dataset (Chin, Carter, and Wright 2021). These datasets are well-developed and frequently used in political science research.

However, irregular power transitions are not limited to irregular entries and exits but should

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<sup>1</sup>According to the Archigos dataset, “Removed by Military, without Foreign Support” and “Removed by Other Government Actors, without Foreign Support” in the variable `exitcode` are classified as coups.

<sup>2</sup>According to the Archigos dataset, “Removed by Military, without Foreign Support” and “Removed by Other Government Actors, without Foreign Support” in the variable `exitcode` are classified as coups.

also include irregular “overstays.” Using illegal means to overthrow an incumbent leader before their term expires is undoubtedly an irregular power transition. Similarly, an incumbent using illegitimate means to extend their term beyond term limits is also an irregular power transition.

Although academic attention to irregular retention of power has increased since the 1990s, especially after Peru’s President Alberto Fujimori’s self-coup in 1992, it remains comparatively understudied and has several shortcomings. First, there is no universally accepted terminology for this “overstaying in power” type of irregular power transition, unlike the clear term “coup.” Consequently, various terms such as self-coup, autogolpe, and executive coup are used by different scholars. This dissertation will use ‘autocoup’ to refer to this type of irregular power transition, which will be thoroughly discussed in Chapter 3. Second, there is no consensus on the definition of an autocoup. Existing definitions remain vague, often conflating power expansions and power extensions<sup>3</sup>. For example, Maxwell A. Cameron (1998a) defines an autogolpe as a temporary suspension of the constitution and dissolution of Congress by the executive, who then rules by decree. This definition focuses on power expansion instead of power extension, leading to conceptual confusion and misalignment with the definition of a classic coup. Third, a consensus autocoup dataset is lacking. While several related datasets exist, as discussed by Baturo and Tolstrup (2022) in coding their Incumbent Takeover dataset, the terminologies, definitions, and coverage years vary, lacking wide acknowledgement and extensive academic exploration. In summary, autocoup has not been analysed in a comparative manner connected with coups.

Analysing coups and autocoups separately is less problematic. However, from a comprehensive framework perspective on irregular power transitions and leader survival, coups and autocoups should be, and can be, analysed within the same framework. Both coup and autocoup significantly influence democratic backsliding and are the most frequent means of irregular power transition. Furthermore, as both are called “coups,” classic coups and autocoups are

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<sup>3</sup>The definitions and concepts of power expansion and power extension can be vague. In this study, we define power expansion as an incumbent acquiring additional authority from other state apparatuses, whereas power extension refers to an incumbent prolonging their tenure beyond the designated term in office.

very similar since a coup is launched to replace the current leader, while an autocoup is staged to replace the future leader.

## 1.3 Academic Contributions

This study addresses a critical gap in the literature by offering a comprehensive framework for analysing both coups and autocoups, which are the most common forms of irregular power transitions. While existing research often examines these topics separately with varying terminologies, definitions, methods, and datasets, this dissertation integrates these elements to provide a unified perspective on irregular power transitions and leader survival.

Our contributions are threefold:

- **Emphasis on power dynamics and regime types:** We highlight the significant role of power dynamics, particularly the influence of regime types, in determining the success and frequency of coup attempts. Our analysis underscores how the expected chances of coup success motivate such attempts, with military regimes being notably susceptible.
- **Refined definition and novel dataset for autocoups:** We introduce a refined definition of autocoups and develop a novel dataset covering events from 1945 to 2022. This enables a comparative analysis with classic coups, providing clearer insights into the nature and impact of autocoups on political systems.
- **Survival analysis of leaders from different entry modes:** By applying survival analysis to existing coup data and our new autocoup dataset, we demonstrate how different modes of entry into power significantly affect leader survival. Our findings reveal that leaders who come to power through coups typically have shorter tenures and face higher removal risks compared to those who extend their rule through autocoups.

Our analysis of irregular power transitions is particularly relevant to understanding democratic backsliding. These transitions violate democratic norms and disrupt the path towards

stable democracy. Leaders who gain power through irregular means often employ undemocratic tactics, such as suppressing opposition, to consolidate their illegitimate hold on power. This creates a vicious cycle where the erosion of democratic institutions is both a cause and consequence of efforts to maintain power.

## 1.4 Overview of the thesis

This study is structured into three main chapters beyond the introduction, each addressing key aspects of irregular power transitions and their implications for political stability and democratic processes.

**Chapter 2** examines the determinants of classic coup attempts. While extensive research exists on coups, most studies focus on observable factors before coups, such as economic performance, political stability, previous coups, and coup-proofing strategies. This chapter, however, emphasizes the less observable but crucial factor of expected chances of coup success, which have been often overlooked. Utilizing the double probit model with sample selection, the analysis reveals that expected success rates significantly influence coup attempts. These success rates are primarily shaped by the balance of power between incumbents and challengers, which is largely determined by regime type. The findings indicate that military regimes face a much higher risk of coups compared to dominant-party regimes.

**Chapter 3** focuses on the concept of autcoups, specifically on power extensions by incumbent leaders. It distinguishes autcoups from broader concepts like self-coups or executive coups by redefining them as instances where incumbent leaders refuse to transition power as mandated, thereby overstaying in office. Based on this refined definition, a novel dataset of autcoup events from 1945 to 2022 is introduced, encompassing 110 attempts and 87 successes. The chapter includes case studies and empirical analyses that demonstrate the utility of this dataset for quantitative research, providing a basis for empirical analysis on autcoups.

**Chapter 4** investigates how the method of power acquisition impacts the longevity of lead-

ers who come to power through coups versus those who extend their rule through autocoups. The hypothesis is that the method of accession significantly affects leader tenure. Using the Cox proportional hazards model and a time-dependent Cox model, the chapter provides evidence of differing survival times between these two types of leaders. The results indicate that leaders who come to power through coups face a significantly higher risk of removal compared to those who extend their rule through autocoups. This finding highlights the implications for political stability and democratic processes, suggesting that the relatively low cost and high returns of autocoups could incentivize incumbents to seize power in this manner, potentially leading to democratic backsliding and the personalization of power.

In **Chapter 5**, the study concludes by summarizing the main findings, discussing policy implications, and acknowledging the limitations of the research. It also outlines directions for future research, emphasizing the need for further exploration of irregular power transitions, particularly coups and autocoups.

# **Chapter 2**

## **Power Dynamics and Coup Attempts: A Selection Mechanism Analysis**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Coups, defined as “illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive” ([J. M. Powell and Thyne 2011, 252](#)), occur with varying frequency across countries, with some experiencing them more often than others. According to GIC dataset, Latin American countries such as Bolivia witnessed 23 coups between 1950 and 1984, while Argentina experienced 20 during a similar time frame. However, Mexico’s authoritarian period from 1917 to 2000 saw no coups at all. In Africa, Sudan endured 17 coups between 1955 and 2023, whereas South Africa has not experienced any coup since 1950. Similar patterns are observed in the Middle East and South Asia.

The varying frequency of coup attempts has captivated political scientists for decades, leading to extensive research on the subject. As highlighted by Gassebner, Gutmann, and Voigt ([2016](#)), despite approximately one hundred potential determinants of coups being suggested, no consensus has been reached. In an effort to address this issue, they have tested 66 factors proposed in previous literature using three million model permutations in an extreme bounds



analysis (ibid.).

Examining previous research, which has tested around 100 variables as potential determinants of coups, raises an important question beyond simply understanding why coups are more frequent in some countries than others. The critical question is: Can we establish a framework to help scholars focus on the most relevant factors of coups, rather than sifting through over 100 variables without reaching a consensus?

Reviewing previously proposed variables of coups, it is evident that all focus on pre-coup conditions, with no consideration given to post-coup factors. This means more attention is paid to factors observable before a coup, such as military force or spending, economic performance, political stability, and previous coups.

Table 2.1: Top 10 countries with the most coup attempts

Country	Coup Attempted	Coup Succeeded	Success Rate
Bolivia	23	11	47.8%
Argentina	20	7	35.0%
Sudan	17	6	35.3%
Haiti	13	9	69.2%
Venezuela	13	0	0.0%
Iraq	12	4	33.3%
Syria	12	8	66.7%
Thailand	12	8	66.7%
Ecuador	11	5	45.5%
Burundi	11	5	45.5%
Guatemala	10	5	50.0%
Total	491	245	49.9%

*Source: GIC dataset*

However, coups are high-stakes gambles with an all-or-nothing nature. Due to its illegality, the consequences of a failed coup can be severe, with perpetrators risking imprisonment, exile, or even death. In some instances, repercussions extend to their families, which means coup plotters would not take the risk without some assurance of success.

Historical coup attempts and their success rates provide valuable hints about coup plotters' decision-making processes. Despite the significant risks associated with coups, as shown in Table 2.1, there have been 491 coups worldwide since 1950. Importantly, about half of these coups have been successful. At first glance, coups appear to be a high-success-rate political venture. However, compared to over 12,000 country-years since 1950, the occurrence of 491 coups is relatively rare, accounting for only about 4% (GIC).

The low occurrence rate and high success rate clearly indicate that the initiation of coups is highly selective. In other words, the likelihood of a coup occurring depends greatly on its probability of success. However, the probability of success is not a factor that can be observed before a coup, at least not to outsiders and researchers, but coup plotters surely have more information on the possible outcome of coups.

Since coup plotters meticulously assess potential outcomes before staging a coup, coup researchers should also analyse what factors might affect the outcome of coups. Otherwise, we ran the risk of selection bias. When considering the factors that most affect the outcomes of coups, the current literature predominantly identifies military power as the decisive factor in the success of coups. Ultimately, military power is determined by the power structure within the regime.

Unlike coup plotters, who have a clearer understanding of power structures and dynamics, including their supporters, followers, bystanders, and opponents, researchers are not able to accurately observe this information. However, we can analyse the most relevant factors which determine the balance of power and are observable to us. This leads us to **regime type**, which reflects the distribution of power within a government, encompassing who controls the military, sets policy, and appoints officials. Since coup plotters consider the balance of power within

the regime before acting, this study argues that regime type plays a crucial role in shaping coup attempts. Analysing which regime types are more susceptible to coups can offer valuable insights.

We employ a **double probit model with sample selection** to address the selection bias. This model allows us to analyze both the factors influencing coup success and the factors related to the decision to initiate a coup attempt in the first place.

This study contributes to the literature in two key ways. First, it emphasizes the importance of focusing on expected success rates as a driver of coup attempts, offering a more targeted approach compared to past studies. Second, it highlights the significance of regime type as a factor influencing coup likelihood, even when researchers lack perfect knowledge of a regime's internal power dynamics.

The subsequent section (Section 2) explores the dynamics of coup attempts and their outcomes. Section 3 delves into the research design, outlining the methodology and variables used in the analysis. Section 4 presents and discusses the empirical findings. Finally, Section 5 concludes the chapter by summarizing the key insights and their implications.

## **2.2 Dynamics of coup attempts and outcomes**

Coup attempts are driven by a complex interplay of factors, including motivations (**disposition**) and the resources and opportunities available to succeed (**capability**).

### **2.2.1 Motivations for coups**

This section focuses on the motivations that compel challengers to undertake coups. We can categorize coup motivations into three main types:

**Personal Ambition:** Personal ambition is a significant motivator for the majority of coup plotters, driven by the allure of absolute power, prestige, and wealth. The prospect of seizing absolute power provides an unparalleled opportunity to shape national policies, control resources,

and make significant decisions without constraints. The pursuit of prestige and recognition, along with the potential for immense economic gain and wealth, further incentivizes individuals. Additionally, the desire to leave a lasting legacy and make a historical impact can compel individuals to undertake the risky venture of staging a coup.

**Purported National Interest:** Sometimes coups are justified as necessary interventions to address national crises, uphold the constitution, or facilitate a transition to democracy. While the motivations behind such claims require scrutiny, genuine examples do exist. For instance, the 2010 coup in Niger ousted President Tandja, who attempted an unconstitutional third term by dissolving the opposing court and calling a self-serving referendum ([Ginsburg and Elkins 2019](#)).

**Self-Preservation:** In some cases, coups serve as pre-emptive strikes against perceived threats. Coup leaders might not necessarily seek power, but rather fear elimination or political persecution by the incumbent regime. An example is Idi Amin's 1971 coup against Ugandan President Obote, who was attempting to remove Amin from his military command position ([Sudduth 2017](#)).

These motivations are often most prevalent in autocratic regimes, where justifications under the guise of national interest or self-preservation can be used to mask personal agendas. Stable democracies rarely face the same level of constitutional crises or political persecution that might necessitate a coup. However, new established democracies can be vulnerable to instability, economic downturns, and democratic backsliding, creating opportunities for coup plotters to exploit these weaknesses and justify their actions.

Despite the potential motivations outlined above, coups remain relatively uncommon, occurring in only about 4% of country-years since 1950. The main reason is that coup perpetrators face inherent disadvantages compared to incumbent leaders, highlighting the importance of capability. Even the most motivated plotters need the resources and opportunities to succeed. The next section will explore the concept of capability in greater detail.

### 2.2.2 Capability for coups

For coup plotters, the decision to act hinges not only on their motivations but also on a calculated assessment of their chances of success. Several factors can influence this threshold:

- **Military Strength:** A clear advantage in military capabilities compared to the incumbent regime significantly increases the odds of a successful coup.
- **Internal Divisions within the Regime:** Existing fractures within the government's power structure can present opportunities for coup plotters to exploit weaknesses and gain support from disgruntled factions.
- **Public Support:** Widespread discontent with the incumbent regime, especially within the military or key sectors of society, can create an environment ripe for a successful coup.
- **Foreign Backing:** External support from powerful nations can provide resources, legitimacy, and even direct military intervention to tip the scales in favour of the coup plotters.

The high success rate of coups since 1950, as shown in Table 2.1, might suggest that coups are not particularly difficult to succeed. However, it is important to consider selection bias. We only observe attempted coups, not the numerous dispositions and conspiracies that never came to light. Analysing launched coup data alone can be misleading.

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of coup attempts and their likelihood, we need to move beyond historical data and employ a theoretical framework that accounts for selection bias. This framework will allow us to analyze the factors influencing both the success of coups and the decision to attempt a coup in the first place. The next section will delve into such a framework and its implications for our understanding of coup attempts.

### 2.2.3 Framework of coup success

An oft-cited framework ([Gassebner, Gutmann, and Voigt 2016](#); [Aidt and Leon 2019](#)) provides a structured approach to assess the disposition and capability of coup attempts by evaluating the anticipated benefits for coup plotters. The expected pay-off of coups can be represented by the equation:

$$E(U) = p \times B + (1 - p) \times (-C) \quad (2.1)$$

Here, **B** represents the return of a successful coup, **C** signifies the cost of a failed coup, and  $p$  represents the probability of coup success. The condition for staging a coup is when the expected benefit is positive, meaning that the expected pay-off is greater than 0. Rearranging the equation, we get:

$$p \times B > (1 - p) \times C \quad (2.2)$$

Equation 2.2 implies that for Equation 2.1 to hold, the expected benefits earned from successful coups must outweigh the expected cost of failed coups.

While seemingly clear, the equation faces practical challenges. Quantifying **B** (the value of a successful coup) and **C** (the cost of failure) is difficult. The loss of life, freedom, or loved ones after a failed coup, as well as the value of assuming leadership after a successful coup, are intangible concepts that defy precise measurement. As evidenced by the 1979 coup in Ghana<sup>1</sup>, the fate of the coup leader(s) hangs in the balance; they are high likely to be killed if the coup fails, or to execute others if the coup succeeds.

However, these challenges do not render the framework useless. Firstly, its core logic remains valuable, offering insights into how coup plotters might assess the return and cost of their actions. Secondly, given the significant and elusive nature of precise values for **B** and **C**, they

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<sup>1</sup>According to the Archigos dataset, “Removed by Military, without Foreign Support” and “Removed by Other Government Actors, without Foreign Support” in the variable `exitcode` are classified as coups.

can be treated as roughly equal. Consequently, there is no need to fret over how to measure and compare these values precisely. Instead, we can shift our focus from **B** and **C**, to the probability of success ( $p$ ), simplifying Equation 2.2 to:

$$p > (1 - p) \quad (2.3)$$

Equation 2.3 suggests that, to hold Equation 2.2 true, a success probability greater than 50% is necessary. Interestingly, empirical data on coups since 1950 somewhat supports this notion. As shown in Table 2.1, the overall success rate is 49.9%. While this falls short of the 50% threshold, it's important to consider two factors. Firstly, this is an average rate, not necessarily reflective of the probabilities assessed by coup plotters beforehand. Secondly, outliers such as irrational actors and coups driven by self-preservation may not prioritize success probabilities. Taking these points into account, we can propose our first hypothesis:

***H1: The fundamental determinant of a coup attempt is the perceived chance of success. Coup plotters likely require a success threshold of at least 50%.***

This leads us to the next crucial question: What factors determine coup success, influencing the very decision to attempt one? We will discuss it in the next section.

## 2.2.4 Regime types and power dynamics

The high success rate in historical data is merely a post-event statistical description, not indicative of the probability of any specific coup. Importantly, coup plotters do not rely on past success rates as their guide; instead, they assess their chances based on their unique context.

Military strength undeniably plays a critical role in coup attempts. Control of the armed forces offers a significant advantage, explaining why military coups dominate discussions on the topic. Much of the literature treats “coup” and “military coup” interchangeably, with scholars like J. M. Powell and Thyne (2011) finding that half of 14 studies attribute coups solely to

the military. Consequently, significant focus, from both researchers and policy-makers, centres on the balance of power between civilian and military authorities, or among military factions themselves. Strategies like “keeping the military content” (Aidt and Leon 2019) or “providing them with resources” (Huntington 1991) aim to reduce military intervention. Empirical research informs coup-proofing strategies that either decrease the military’s desire for coups or raise barriers to success (Leon 2013; J. Powell et al. 2018).

However, while military power is decisive, it complicates the analysis. As Table 2.3 demonstrates, military regimes, despite concentrated military control, exhibit surprising instability, experiencing the most frequent coup attempts. This highlights a crucial issue: the intra-military component. Treating the military as a monolithic entity ignores its complex internal dynamics (Singh 2016). Any military comprises diverse groups with their own hierarchies, fostering suspicion, competition, and vigilance rather than unity. The clandestine nature of coups necessitates small, secretive groups. Plotters are unsure of other factions’ stances and fear their opposition or intervention, as exemplified by the swiftly thwarted 2021 Niger coup<sup>2</sup>. The success of a coup hinges heavily on other military factions’ reactions (Geddes 1999).

Moreover, military force is not the only factor shaping the balance of power. Internal divisions within the ruling elites, public support, and foreign backing also play important roles. Since the balance of power is not a clearly observable variable, especially difficult to measure for outsiders and academic scholars, we can shift our focus from who controls power in a specific context to what factors shape the balance of power. This leads us to regime type, as the classification of regime type is based mainly on the power structure. For example, “...definition of regimes emphasizes the rules that identify the group from which leaders can come and determine who influences leadership choice and policy” (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014, 314). We will leverage this framework to categorize autocracies based on leadership origin and decision-making, classifying regimes into three main categories: military, personalist, and

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<sup>2</sup>The definitions and concepts of power expansion and power extension can be vague. In this study, we define power expansion as an incumbent acquiring additional authority from other state apparatuses, whereas power extension refers to an incumbent prolonging their tenure beyond the designated term in office.



dominant-party.

- **Military Regimes:** Characterized by the dominance of a junta—a group of military officers who control the regime’s power structure, including leadership selection and policy formulation. Examples include the Brazilian regime (1964-1985), the Argentine regime (1976-1983), and the Salvadoran regime (1948-1984) ([Geddes 1999](#)).
- **Personalist Regimes:** Power resides with a single, charismatic leader who controls policy, the military, and succession. Regimes like Rafael Trujillo’s in the Dominican Republic (1930-1961), Idi Amin’s in Uganda (1971-1979), and Jean-Bédél Bokassa’s in the Central African Republic (1966-1979) exemplify personalist rule (*ibid.*).
- **Dominant-Party Regimes:** Power rests within a well-organized ruling party, with leaders acting as its representatives. The party structure and ideology foster internal cohesion and a long-term vision. Examples include the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in Mexico, the Revolutionary Party of Tanzania (CCM), and Leninist parties in various Eastern European countries (*ibid.*).

The critical distinction between regime types lies in the unique power balance established during their seizure of power, often through irregular and violent means, frequently involving military confrontations. This power struggle typically results in the emergence of the most competent group—be it a military junta, a political party, or a strongman—as the core leadership. Furthermore, the early stages of new regimes are often marked by internal purges to consolidate power and eliminate potential rivals ([Sudduth 2017](#); [Roessler 2011](#)).

Following these external challenges and internal purges, new power dynamics emerge in three primary forms: dominant-party regimes, personalist regimes, and military regimes. These contrasting power dynamics significantly influence a regime’s susceptibility to coups. Dominant-party regimes, characterized by a well-organized party with clear ideology, hierarchy, and discipline, exhibit the greatest resilience against coups due to their institutionalized

structures and unified leadership. Personalist regimes, where power centers around a single strong leader, are relatively stable during the leader's tenure. However, they face a higher risk of coups, particularly due to the lack of clear succession plans and vulnerabilities associated with the leader's personal weaknesses, health issues, and finite lifespan. Military regimes, characterized by power struggles within a junta, are the most vulnerable to coups. The absence of a clear final authority in military regimes often leads to internal conflicts, and the presence of multiple military factions increases the likelihood of resolving disputes through force, making these regimes the least stable. Table 2.2 summarises the key characteristics of the three main regime types.

These contrasting power dynamics significantly influence a regime's susceptibility to coups. As Table 2.3 confirms, military regimes, despite representing only 5.6% of country-years, experience a disproportionate share of coups, accounting for over 22% of all occurrences. Personalist regimes face a similarly high coup risk, constituting 23% of coups while representing only 13% of country-years. Conversely, dominant-party regimes, with their institutionalized structures and unified leadership, exhibit the greatest resilience. They represent 22.6% of country-years but account for only 16.7% of coups. The column "Coups Likelihood" clearly illustrates the varying risks: military regimes have the highest likelihood at 17.2%, followed by personalist regimes at 7.7%, and dominant-party regimes at 3.2% (excluding *Other* regime types).

***H2: Due to their balance of power dynamics, military regimes are more prone to coups, followed by personalist regimes, while dominant-party regimes are the least likely to experience coups among the three.***

Table 2.2: Main features of different types of regimes

Regime Type	Power Concentration	Succession	Military Alignment	Stability	Examples
Military	Junta	Unclear	May have significant influence	Low	Brazil (1964-1985), Argentina (1976-1983)
Personalist	Single Leader	Unclear or dependent on leader's will	Subordinated to leader	Moderate (initially), Low (long-term)	Dominican Republic (Trujillo, 1930-1961)
Dominant-Party	Party Leadership	Institutionalized	Aligned with the party	High	Mexico (PRI), China (CPC)

Source: *GWF & Author*

Table 2.3: Regime types and coups since 1950

Regime Type	Country	Year	Share	Num of Coups	Percent of Coups	Success Rate	Coup Likelihood
Democracy		5303	46.7%	122	24.8%	51.6%	2.3%
Dominant-Party		2569	22.6%	82	16.7%	53.7%	3.2%
Personal		1477	13.0%	113	23.0%	44.2%	7.7%
Monarchy		1056	9.3%	25	5.1%	56.0%	2.4%
Military		638	5.6%	110	22.4%	48.2%	17.2%
Other		322	2.8%	39	7.9%	53.8%	12.1%
Total		11365	100.0%	491	100.0%	49.9%	4.3%

Source: *REIGN and GIC Datasets*

## 2.3 Research Design

### 2.3.1 Double probit with sample selection model

This study employs a sophisticated statistical approach to account for the selective nature of coup attempts. While coup attempt rates vary across regimes (as discussed previously), success rates tend to be surprisingly consistent, hovering around 50% (as shown in Table 2.3). This suggests that coup attempts are not random acts, but rather strategically planned and undertaken only when the odds of success appear favourable. A standard statistical model would not account for this selectivity, potentially leading to biased results.

To address this issue, we utilize a two-stage sample selection model, similar to the approach used by J. Powell (2012). This model has two parts:

- **Selection Equation (Stage 1):** This stage analyzes the factors influencing whether a coup attempt occurs in a particular regime. The primary explanatory variable here is regime type, as previously discussed. Additional control variables may also be included, denoted by **XB**.
- **Outcome Equation (Stage 2):** This stage focuses on the probability of success for those coup attempts that actually take place.

The primary explanatory variables are regime types, as previously discussed. Control variables are included in **XB**. The selection equation (first stage) models the probability that a coup attempt occurs and can be expressed as follows:

$$y_1^* = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 Regime_i + \mathbf{XA} + \mu_{1i} \quad (2.4)$$

Here,  $y_1^*$  is an unobserved variable, which may be known to coup plotters.  $Regime_i$  is a categorical variable (*military*, *personalist*, or *dominant-party*). **XB** captures other control variables, such as the economic crisis index, previous coups, military expenditure, etc.

The observed binary outcome  $y_1$  is:

$$y_1 = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if } y_1^* > 0 \text{ (coup attempt occurs)} \\ 0 & \text{if } y_1^* \leq 0 \text{ (no coup attempt)} \end{cases}$$

In the first stage, if  $y_1^* \leq 0$ , no coup attempt occurs in a given country-year, indicating that the unobserved variable does not reach the threshold. If  $y_1^* > 0$ , at least one coup attempt is made in a country-year, indicating that the unobserved variable surpasses the threshold. The probability is expressed as:

$$\begin{aligned} Prob(y_1 = 1) &= Prob(y_1^* > 0) \\ &= \Phi(\alpha_0 + \alpha_1 Regime_i + \mathbf{XA}) \end{aligned} \tag{2.5}$$

Similarly, the outcome equation (second stage) models the probability that a coup attempt is successful, given that it occurs:

$$y_2^* = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Regime_i + \mathbf{XB} + \mu_{2i} \tag{2.6}$$

The observed outcome  $y_2$  is:

$$y_2 = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if } y_2^* > 0 \text{ (coup succeeds)} \\ 0 & \text{if } y_2^* \leq 0 \text{ (coup fails)} \end{cases}$$

The probability equations is:

$$Prob(y_2 = 1 | y_1 = 1) = \Phi(\beta_0 + \beta_1 Regime_i + \mathbf{XB}) \tag{2.7}$$

### 2.3.2 Variables

- Dependent variable

Our analysis utilizes data on coup attempts and outcomes from J. M. Powell and Thyne (2011). A successful coup is defined as one where the incumbent leader is removed from power for more than seven days. The dataset covers the period from 1950 to 2023 and includes information on 491 coup attempts, with roughly half (245) being successful. Descriptive statistics for these coup attempts and regime types can be found in Table 2.1 and Table 2.3.

- Key Independent Variable: Regime Type

The core variable of interest is regime type, categorized following the classification system of Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2014) (GWF). We focus on military, personalist, and dominant-party regimes, with democracies and monarchies included for comparison. Descriptive statistics for regime types are presented in Table 2.3.

- Control variables

Our control variables are chosen based on the research of Gassebner, Gutmann, and Voigt (2016). They analyzed 66 factors potentially influencing coups and found that slow economic growth, prior coup attempts, and other forms of political violence are particularly significant factors. Therefore, we include economic performance, political violence, and the number of previous coups as our main control variables.

**Economic Performance:** We measure economic performance using the current-trend ( $CT$ ) ratio developed by Krishnarajan (2019). This ratio compares a country's current GDP per capita to the average GDP per capita over the previous five years. A higher  $CT$  ratio indicates stronger economic performance. We use GDP per capita data (in constant 2017 international 1000 dollars, PPP) from the V-Dem dataset by Fariss et al. (2022), lagged by one year to reflect the prior year's economic impact. For a country  $i$  at year  $t$ , the  $CT$  ratio is calculated as follows:

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

**Political Violence:** We capture overall regime stability by including a violence index that encompasses all types of internal and interstate wars and violence. This data comes from the Major Episodes of Political Violence dataset by Marshall ([Marshall 2005](#)).

**Previous coups:** The number of previous coups in a country is included in the first-stage (selection) model to assess its influence on the likelihood of a coup attempt. However, it is excluded from the second-stage model (outcome) because the number of past coups may not directly impact the outcome of a specific coup attempt. Recognizing that previous coups from a long time ago might not significantly affect the current situation, I ran another regression using the time distance since the last coup instead of the number of previous coups for comparison. This approach accounts for the diminishing impact of past events over time, providing a potentially more accurate assessment of how historical coup activity influences the likelihood of current coup attempts.

## 2.4 Results and Discussion

The double `probit` model with sample selection, estimated using the `sampleSelection` package ([Toomet and Henningsen 2008](#)) in R, provides valuable insights into the factors influencing coup attempts and their outcomes across different regime types from 1950 to 2019 (Table [2.4](#)). We present two models that differ slightly in their treatment of previous coups: Model 1 incorporates the number of previous coups, while Model 2 utilizes the time elapsed since the last coup.



Table 2.4: Sample Selection Model of Regime Types and Coups, 1950-2019

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coup Attempts	Coup Outcome	Coup Attempts	Coup Outcome
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Constant	−1.774*** (0.058)	−1.803*** (0.360)	−1.663*** (0.088)	−0.653 (0.518)
Regime: Democracy	0.056 (0.072)	0.068 (0.121)	0.043 (0.075)	0.042 (0.192)
Military	0.687*** (0.084)	0.596*** (0.170)	0.345*** (0.091)	0.247 (0.229)
Monarchy	0.282** (0.118)	0.178 (0.201)	0.234* (0.123)	0.088 (0.310)
Personalist	0.319*** (0.075)	0.128 (0.170)	0.134* (0.080)	−0.145 (0.205)
Economic trend	−0.015*** (0.002)	−0.004 (0.007)	−0.014*** (0.002)	0.009 (0.008)
GDP per capita	−0.028*** (0.003)	−0.028*** (0.006)	−0.016*** (0.003)	−0.016 (0.010)
Political violence	0.033** (0.013)	0.033* (0.020)	0.038*** (0.013)	0.025 (0.031)
Previous coups (P)	0.030*** (0.010)		0.447*** (0.086)	
Yrs since coup (Y)			−0.018*** (0.004)	
Interaction term: P * Y			−0.013*** (0.005)	
Observations	9,606	9,606	9,606	9,606
Log Likelihood	−1,663.646	−1,663.646	−1,598.603	−1,598.603
$\rho$	0.898*** (0.158)	0.898*** (0.158)	0.386* (0.234)	0.386* (0.234)

Note:

\*p&lt;0.1; \*\*p&lt;0.05; \*\*\*p&lt;0.01

### 2.4.1 The Selection Model: Coup Attempts

Table 2.5: Average marginal effects of coup attempts (Selection of Model 1)

Term	Contrast	AME <sup>l</sup>	Ratio Percent
Regime: Democracy	mean(democracy - dominant-party)	0.003	13.030
Military	mean(military - dominant-party)	0.070	277.730
Monarchy	mean(monarchy - dominant-party)	0.020	80.620
Personal	mean(personal - dominant-party)	0.024	93.980
Economic trend	mean(+1)	-0.001	-2.850
GDP per capita	mean(+1)	-0.002	-5.400
Political violence	mean(+1)	0.003	6.550
Previous coups	mean(+1)	0.002	5.930

<sup>l</sup>AME: Average Marginal Effect

In the selection model (Column 1), military and personalist regimes exhibit significant positive coefficients at the 1% level, indicating a higher likelihood of experiencing coup attempts compared to dominant-party regimes. Control variables also exhibit effects in expected directions. Stronger economic performance, indicated by higher economic growth trends and GDP per capita levels, correlates with a lower risk of coup attempts. This suggests that better economic conditions and relatively higher living standards reduce incentives for coups. Political violence shows a positive and significant effect on coup attempts, indicating that higher levels of instability increase the likelihood of coups. The positive coefficient for the number of previous coups suggests a “copycat” effect from earlier incidents.

While interpreting `probit` model results directly is not intuitive, Table 2.5, generated using `margineffects` package (Arel-Bundock, Greifer, and Heiss NaN), helps clarify the regime effects. The Average Marginal Effect (AME) column shows changes in probability when a variable increases by one unit (for numeric variables) or compared to a reference

category (for categorical variables). For instance, the military regime's marginal effect of 0.07 indicates that the probability of coup attempts in military regimes is 7 percentage points (pp) higher than in dominant-party regimes, *ceteris paribus*. For GDP per capita, the marginal effect of -0.002 suggests that a \$1000 increase reduces the probability of coup attempts by 0.2 pp under average conditions.

The Ratio column displays the relative change in percent. While a 7 pp increase might seem modest, it is substantial in context. Given that the average probability of a coup attempt in dominant-party regimes is approximately 2.53%, the 7 pp increase means military regimes are about 277.7% more likely to encounter coups than dominant-party regimes—a significant change. Similarly, personalist regimes show a 2.4 pp higher probability, about 94% more likely compared to dominant-party regimes. Monarchies display a positive effect similar to personalist regimes, reflecting that monarchies are essentially a subset of personalist regimes with royal titles.

Control variables, however, show weak effects in predicting coup attempts. None of their marginal effects reach 1 pp in probability, and all are less than 7% in ratio. Given that the actual probability of a coup attempt is only 2% to 3%, these small increases or decreases can be considered negligible.

These results align with our theoretical expectations regarding internal power struggles within military juntas and succession vulnerabilities in personalist regimes, underscoring the importance of regime structure in understanding coup likelihood.

Model 2 employs years since the last coup instead of the number of previous coups. Due to most countries not experiencing coups, an interaction term between previous coups (as a binary variable indicating presence or absence of coups) and years since the last coup is used. Generally, Model 2 shows results in the same direction as Model 1, albeit with relatively lower coefficients (Table 2.6).

Table 2.6: Average marginal effects of coup attempts (Selection of Model 2)

Term	Contrast	AME <sup>l</sup>	Ratio Percent
Regime: Democracy	mean(democracy - dominant-party)	0.003	8.930
Military	mean(military - dominant-party)	0.028	91.650
Monarchy	mean(monarchy - dominant-party)	0.018	57.040
Personal	mean(personal - dominant-party)	0.009	30.090
Economic trend	mean(+1)	-0.001	-2.530
GDP per capita	mean(+1)	-0.001	-2.890
Political violence	mean(+1)	0.003	7.330
Previous coups (P)	mean(1 - 0)	0.023	91.990
NA	mean(+1)	-0.002	-5.050

<sup>l</sup>AME: Average Marginal Effect

## 2.4.2 The Outcome Model: Coup Success

The outcome model (Columns 2 and 4 in Table 2.4) reveals determinants of coup success. Military regimes demonstrate a higher probability of coup success compared to dominant-party regimes, aligning with expectations that military regimes face higher coup risks due to their increased chances of success. Personalist and monarchical regimes show slight positive effects on coup success, but these effects are not statistically significant.

Control variables exhibit different patterns in the outcome model compared to the selection model. Both GDP per capita and political violence maintain a weak influence, similar to their effects in the selection model. However, the economic trend shows a less significant negative effect on coup success.

These results indicate that regime type remains a significant determinant of both coup attempts and successes, even after controlling for other factors, strongly supporting the proposed

theoretical framework.

### 2.4.3 Discussion

The  $\rho$  values of 0.898 in Model 1 and 0.386 in Model 2, significant at 1% and 10% levels respectively, are crucial parameters in the sample selection model. These values represent the correlation between the error terms of the selection equation (coup attempts) and the outcome equation (coup outcomes). A high and significant  $\rho$  suggests that unobserved factors influencing the likelihood of a coup attempt are strongly correlated with those influencing the likelihood of a successful coup. Practically, this indicates that the selection model is appropriate and that accounting for selection bias (i.e., the fact that only coups with high chances of success will be attempted) is critical for obtaining unbiased estimates. The high  $\rho$  value indicates that the same underlying conditions that lead to a coup attempt also affect its success, underscoring the importance of considering both stages in the analysis.

The results strongly support the choice of the sample selection model. Significant coefficients with theoretically consistent directions suggest the model effectively captures key aspects of coup dynamics. Regimes with weaker institutional structures are more vulnerable to coup attempts, while better economic conditions make coups less likely overall. The model effectively addresses the non-random nature of coup attempts by treating selection and outcome as separate processes.

The observed disparity between coup attempt rates and success rates across regimes points towards selection bias, further validating the use of the sample selection model. This model acknowledges that coups are not random events, but rather strategic actions undertaken when the odds appear favourable.

In summary, the double `probit` model with sample selection proves to be a well-suited approach for this research. It provides robust insights into the factors influencing both the likelihood of coup attempts and their success rates across different regime types. The findings

highlight the crucial role of regime structure and the selective nature of coup attempts, supporting the theoretical framework and empirical strategy employed in this study.

#### **2.4.4 Implications**

The finding that regime type plays a crucial role in determining coup attempts, while not surprising, has received relatively little attention as a primary research focus. However, even if this result is acknowledged more widely by academics or politicians, it is unlikely to be implemented as a coup-proofing strategy.

Firstly, regime type is not a policy that can be easily altered. It is largely established during the formation of the regime, resulting from power struggles within the ruling group. As previously discussed, there are specific reasons why one regime type is chosen over another. Regimes established through irregular means are unlikely to transition to a more stable regime type peacefully and smoothly.

Secondly, even if a particular regime type is more effective at preventing coups, this may hold little significance for those in power. Autocratic leaders often prioritize personal power and survival over long-term regime stability, as more stable systems may not benefit them personally. Democratic norms and constraints may be seen as obstacles to their goals rather than as safeguards against instability.

While this conclusion might seem discouraging, it is not entirely pessimistic. The power game involves not only the top leaders but also the majority of other elites. While top leaders may prioritize personal gains, other elites, including the military, economic elites, and civil society, have a vested interest in a stable political environment. Therefore, it is possible to reach a consensus for a political system that is less susceptible to coups, potentially benefiting a broader spectrum of society.

## 2.5 Conclusion

Motivated by the lack of consensus despite numerous empirical studies on the determinants of coups, this study introduces a novel approach that prioritizes determinants based on their impact on coup success. By analysing coup success rates, the study hypothesizes that the expected outcomes of coups are critical determinants of their occurrence. Utilizing a double `probit` model with sample selection, I investigate and confirm the relationship between regime types and coup attempts.

The findings suggest that regime type plays a significant role in the likelihood of coup attempts. Military and personalist regimes, characterized by weaker institutional frameworks and higher vulnerability during power transitions, are more susceptible to coups. This underscores the importance of supporting initiatives that strengthen constitutional institutions within these regimes.

The research also finds that stronger economic performance is associated with a lower risk of coups, suggesting that policies promoting economic development can be effective in reducing coup risk.

The study shows that the most efficient coup-proofing strategies involve the establishment of strong institutions. In contrast, purges, random shifting of military officers, or increased military expenditures are less effective. However, few autocratic leaders, particularly dictators or military juntas, are willing to institutionalize their regimes, as such reforms may constrain their power or shorten their terms. While institutions benefit the regime, they do not necessarily benefit the leaders themselves.

Future research could explore specific institutional reforms that are most effective in improving stability across different regimes.

## **Chapter 3**

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

### **Abstract**

This study aims to clarify the concept of autocoups, specifically focusing on power extensions by incumbent leaders. By distinguishing autocoups from the broader and more ambiguous concepts of self-coups or executive takeover, which encompass both executive power aggrandizement and power extension, this research redefines the concept of autocoups. Based on this refined definition, I introduce a novel dataset of autocoup events from 1945 to 2022. Using the newly compiled dataset, the research includes three types of case studies that provide qualitative insights into the dynamics of autocoups. Additionally, an empirical analysis on the determinants of autocoup attempts and success is offered to demonstrate how the autocoup dataset can be employed for more quantitative research. This study contributes to the existing literature by providing a clearer conceptual framework and a novel dataset of autocoups. It enhances our understanding of the mechanisms and motivations behind power extensions by incumbent



leaders and examines the implications for democratic backsliding, democratic breakdown, personalization, and autocratic deterioration. The insights gained from this study could draw more attention to the effects of autocoups on power transitions, political stability, and democratic resilience.

keywords: *Coups, Autocoups, Political Leadership*

### 3.1 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, vio-

lence, and even civil wars.

Despite their significance, autocalps are understudied compared to traditional calps. Although several relevant concepts and terminologies such as self-calps, autocalps, autocalpes, incumbent takeovers, executive aggrandizement, overstay, and continuismo have been proposed and discussed ([Marsteintredet and Malamud 2019](#); [Baturu 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 autocalp datasets is still in its early stages compared to the rich datasets of traditional calps. Hence, the limited existing studies on autocalps 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 “autocalp” first. Based on a clear definition, we can introduce an autocalp dataset that can be used for further empirical analysis. This study aims to address these knowledge gap surrounding autocalps and contribute in three areas. First, it clarifies the terminology by defining autocalps based mainly on power extension. Second, it introduces a new dataset of autocalps 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 autocalps.

The subsequent section, based on a comprehensive review of the definitions of power expansions and power extensions, proposes a precise definition of autocalps. This will be followed by an introduction to the new autocalp dataset in Section 3. In Section 4 and 5, I will explain the determinants of autocalp attempts through two case studies and demonstrate how the novel autocalp dataset collected in this study can be used in empirical analysis. Finally, I will conclude this chapter in Section, summarizing the key insights gained from the study and suggesting avenues for future research.

## **Chapter 4**

# **Power Acquisition and Leadership Survival: A Comparative Analysis of Coup-Entry and Autocoup Leaders**

# Chapter 5

## Conclusion

### 5.1 Main Findings

This study delves into the dynamics and implications of irregular power transitions, focusing on coups and autocoups. The findings illuminate the complex interplay between incumbents and challengers fighting for power.

Firstly, our analysis reveals that the expected success rate of a coup attempt significantly influences its likelihood. This success rate is heavily influenced by the balance of power between the incumbent regime and challengers, which is largely determined by regime type. We find that military regimes, although with more control over their own military forces, face a higher risk of coups compared to dominant-party regimes.

Secondly, the study introduces a redefined concept: the autocoup. Defined as an incumbent leader's refusal to relinquish power as mandated, this research distinguishes autoups from broader terms like self-coups. Based on this definition, we present the first publicly available dataset of autocoup events from 1945 to 2022, encompassing 110 attempts and 87 successful autoups. Case studies and empirical analyses demonstrate the dataset's utility for quantitative research, providing a robust foundation for further analysis on autoups.

Thirdly, employing survival analysis techniques, the study finds clear differences in leader

longevity between those who come to power through coups and those who extend their rule through autoups. The results indicate that coup-installed leaders face a significantly higher risk of removal compared to autoups leaders who manipulate the system to extend their rule.

## 5.2 Policy Implications

The findings of this study offer valuable insights for policy-makers concerned with promoting and protecting global democracy, which has faced increasing challenges despite a general post-WWII trend towards democratization. Notably, the “third wave” of democratization ([Huntington 1991](#)) witnessed a surge in democratic transitions in the late 20th century. Since the Cold War’s end, democratic nations have outnumbered non-democratic ones (Figure 5.1) with the gap widening.

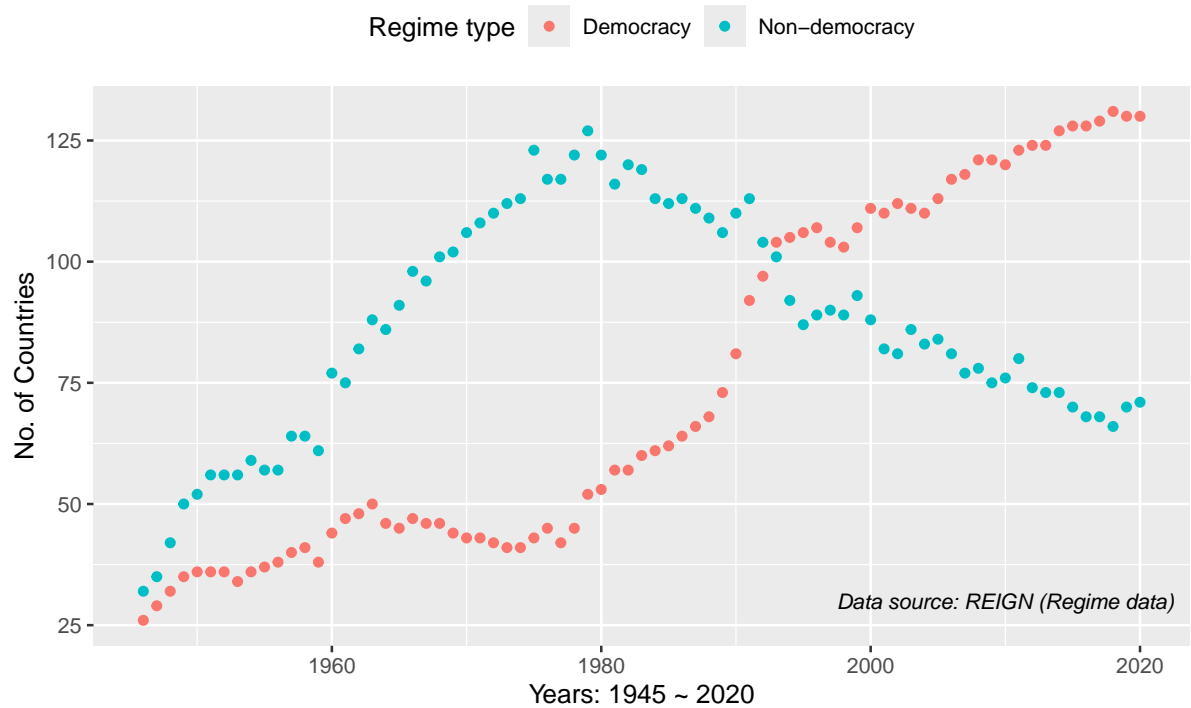


Figure 5.1: Comparison of the number of democratic and non-democratic countries (1945-2020)

However, a “democratic recession” has emerged in recent years ([Diamond 2008](#)). Freedom House reports an 18th consecutive year of global freedom decline in 2023 ([Freedom House 2024](#)). While few countries have completely regressed to autocracy, the average global democracy level has fallen back to pre-2000 levels. Notably, democratic backsliding often occurs within regimes, with democracies becoming less liberal and autocracies becoming less competitive ([Mechkova, Lührmann, and Lindberg 2017](#)).

This research highlights irregular power transitions as a significant factor in democratic backsliding within regimes. These transitions, often coups or autocoups, violate democratic norms and disrupt the path towards stable democracies. Leaders who gain power through irregular means often resort to undemocratic tactics to maintain control, creating a vicious cycle of eroding democratic institutions.

Our findings suggest that the shorter lifespans and potentially severe consequences associated with coups may deter potential coup leaders. Conversely, autocoups appear to be a more tempting option for power-hungry leaders due to their higher success rates, seemingly moderate consequences, and extended leader tenure after the autocoup. This trend may explain the decline in classic coups since the 1990s alongside the rise of autocoups ([Bermeo 2016](#)).

### 5.3 Limitations and directions for future research

This study offers a novel framework for analysing irregular power transitions, but some limitations require further exploration:

- **Data refinement:** Defining and classifying autocoups is a new approach. Future research should validate this classification system through additional studies and expert evaluations.
- **Data harmonization:** The current analysis faces challenges due to mismatched units (country-year vs. leader) between coup and autocoup datasets. Future efforts should ex-

plore data harmonization techniques for more robust comparisons.

- **Democratic backsliding:** While this study establishes a connection between irregular power transitions and democratic backsliding, further empirical evidence is needed to solidify this link.

Several avenues exist for future research:

- **Terminology and data collection:** Refining the “autocoup” concept and achieving wider recognition will facilitate more accurate and comprehensive data collection.
- **Dataset expansion:** Expanding the autocoup dataset with more cases and integrating it with data on other irregular leadership transitions can provide a more holistic view of political survival after these events.
- **Power dynamics and long-term impacts:** Utilizing this dataset, future studies can delve deeper into power dynamics at play and explore the long-term consequences of irregular transitions on political systems, particularly regarding democratic backsliding, breakdown, and personalization of power.

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the dynamics of irregular power transitions, specifically focusing on coups and autocoups. By redefining autocoups, classifying the dataset, analysing determinants, and comparing leader longevity, we establish a framework for understanding irregular transitions and leader survival. This work contributes to a deeper understanding of democratic resilience and political stability. Future research can build upon this foundation by conducting further empirical analyses based on the novel autocoup dataset and continuing to refine the framework.



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