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

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Abstract

This thesis addresses a notable lacuna in the study of irregular leadership transitions by systematically incorporating autocoups—instances wherein incumbent leaders extend their constitutionally mandated terms through extra-constitutional means. It refines the conceptual definition of autocoups by resolving prevailing ambiguities, thereby aligning them more closely with conventional coup frameworks. On the basis of this refined definition, the thesis introduces a novel global dataset of autocoup events spanning the period from 1945 to 2023, comprising 83 documented cases, 64 of which were successful.

Utilising this dataset, the study conducts a large-N empirical analysis to examine the structural determinants of autocoups. The findings indicate that most power-centred regimes–presidential democracies and personalist regimes–are significantly more susceptible to employing autocoups as a strategy for power retention, in contrast to other regime types. This pattern diverges from that of traditional coups, which have historically been more prevalent in military regimes.

The analysis then shifts to the question of leadership survival, employing survival analysis techniques to compare the political longevity of leaders who assumed office via traditional coups with those who retained power through autocoups. Contrary to the hypothesis that autocoup leaders survive longer than their coup-installed counterparts, the results reveal that—once very short-lived leaderships (less than 180 days) are excluded—the method of power acquisition does not exert a statistically significant effect on leadership duration. Instead, regime type emerges once again as the critical determinant: military regimes exhibit a significantly

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higher hazard ratio for leadership removal compared to the reference category of dominant-party regimes, mirroring trends observed in classic coups.

The thesis also assesses the broader institutional ramifications of such irregular power transitions, particularly with respect to democratisation. Using Polity scores as a proxy for democratic quality and applying a country-fixed effects model, the analysis demonstrates that autocoups are associated with a sustained erosion of democratic institutions both preceding and following their occurrence. In contrast, while traditional coups precipitate an immediate and sharp decline in democratic quality, they are often followed by democratic recovery or transitions over time. These findings highlight the divergent political trajectories engendered by coups and autocoups and call for greater scholarly and policy attention to the consistently negative consequences of autocoups for democratic governance.

Taken together, the findings underscore the distinct nature, drivers, and consequences of coups and autocoups. This research makes several substantive contributions: it clarifies the conceptual boundaries of autocoups; provides a new empirical basis for their systematic study; and offers robust comparative insights into how different modes of irregular power transition influence both leadership survival and institutional development. The implications are substantial for academic scholarship and policy-making alike, particularly in the context of global democratic backsliding and the resilience of political institutions.

Keywords: *Coups, Autocoups, Leadership transitions, Leadership survival, Democratic resilience*

Chapter 1

Introduction

At the heart of contemporary political dynamics lies a fundamental question: why are some political leaders prematurely removed from office, while others succeed in extending their tenure beyond constitutionally mandated limits? Furthermore, how does the mode of their survival or removal shape political stability and democratic institutions? This thesis seeks to address these critical questions by analysing the structural and strategic foundations of irregular leadership transitions.

1.1 Motivations

The stability and resilience of political systems depend crucially on the orderly transfer of power. When leadership transitions occur within established institutional frameworks, they reinforce political legitimacy and contribute to regime durability. In contrast, the breakdown of conventional mechanisms for political succession often precipitates instability, violence, and democratic backsliding. Among the most disruptive of such breakdowns are irregular leadership transitions, which leave lasting institutional legacies and fundamentally alter the political trajectory of regimes. Understanding the causes and consequences of these events remains central to the study of political order and regime change.

The extant literature identifies a broad array of catalysts for irregular leadership exits, including civil wars (Kokkonen and Sundell 2019), international conflict (Mesquita and Siverson 1995), ethnic divisions (Londregan, Bienen, and Walle 1995), economic crises (Miller 2012; Krishnarajan 2019), and natural disasters (Quiroz Flores and Smith 2012). Among these, coups d'état are particularly consequential due to both their frequency and their direct displacement of incumbent leaders. In autocratic regimes, coups account for nearly one-third of all leadership exits—exceeding regular transitions, which constitute just over one-fifth (Frantz and Stein 2016). Furthermore, over 63% of non-constitutional removals in dictatorships are attributable to coups (Svolik 2009).

Consequently, coups have received extensive scholarly attention. A substantial body of research explores their causes, outcomes, and long-term implications for democracy and development (Thyne and Powell 2019). In particular, the study of coup determinants has flourished, with scholars proposing nearly one hundred explanatory variables. Yet, a widely accepted baseline model remains elusive (Gassebner, Gutmann, and Voigt 2016).

By contrast, another form of irregular power transition—the autocoup—has received comparatively limited academic scrutiny. In an autocoup, an incumbent extends their tenure by circumventing or overriding constitutional term limits through extra-constitutional means. While autocoups do not immediately result in leadership change, they constitute a fundamental breach of institutional succession norms and obstruct the expected regular transfer of power. As such, they warrant classification as a critical, albeit understudied, variant of irregular leadership transition.

This thesis argues that autocoups deserve systematic analysis alongside traditional coups within a unified analytical framework. Despite differences in execution, both coups and autocoups involve extra-constitutional efforts to acquire or retain power, and both have significant implications for leadership survival, regime stability, and democratic integrity. Comparative analysis of these two forms of irregular transition can reveal shared drivers, divergent outcomes, and broader lessons for democratic resilience.

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The urgency of this inquiry is underscored by the serious risks associated with irregular transitions. Both coups and autocoups may trigger immediate crises—ranging from institutional paralysis to civil unrest—and leave deep institutional scars. More fundamentally, they tend to dismantle constitutional checks and balances, undermine electoral processes, and accelerate democratic decline or authoritarian consolidation.

Historical cases illustrate these dangers vividly. Ghana's turbulent era from 1979 to 1984 reflects the destabilising effects of classic coups. Following Jerry Rawlings's 1979 coup, eight individuals, including three former heads of state, were executed (Pieterse 1982). Rawlings launched another coup in 1981 and subsequently quashed three further coup attempts (Haynes 2022). In contrast, the 1992 autocoup in Peru, orchestrated by President Alberto Fujimori, exemplifies how an incumbent can dismantle democratic institutions without a change in leadership. Fujimori dissolved Congress, suspended the constitution, and ruled by decree (Mauceri 1995; Maxwell A. Cameron 1998b).

These patterns are increasingly salient in today's global political landscape. According to Freedom House's Freedom in the World 2024 report, global political rights and civil liberties declined for the eighteenth consecutive year in 2023, with setbacks recorded in 52 countries and improvements in only 21 (Freedom House 2024). The persistence of democratic erosion highlights the pressing need to understand the mechanisms that facilitate it—including both coups and autocoups.

This thesis seeks to advance both theoretical and empirical understanding of irregular leadership transitions. It offers insights with substantial implications for scholarly research and policy formulation in fragile or democratising regimes.

1.2   Research objectives and contributions

In response to the pressing challenges posed by irregular leadership transitions, this study undertakes a comprehensive comparative analysis structured around four core research objectives.

First, it seeks to refine the conceptual definition of autocoups and introduce a novel dataset amenable to large-N empirical analysis. Second, it aims to identify the structural and institutional determinants of autocoups through a systematic quantitative investigation. Third, it compares the survival prospects of leaders who ascend to power via traditional coups with those who extend their tenure through autocoups. Finally, it assesses the divergent impacts of coups and autocoups on democratisation trajectories and the resilience of political institutions.

By examining both coups and autocoups from 1950 to 2023, this thesis addresses a significant gap in political science by developing and applying a unified analytical framework that treats these events as distinct yet interrelated forms of extra-constitutional power transition. Through this lens, the study makes four principal contributions to the literature on leadership dynamics, regime stability, and institutional development.

Conceptual clarification and empirical foundation for autocoups: This thesis advances conceptual clarity by situating autocoups within the broader typology of irregular power transitions. It offers a refined definition of autocoups—centred on the executive's unilateral extension of tenure—and clearly differentiates them from both executive aggrandisement and traditional military coups. Building upon this conceptual framework, the study introduces an original dataset of autocoups spanning the period from 1945 to 2023, documenting 83 incidents, of which 64 were successful. This dataset addresses a long-standing empirical lacuna and provides a foundational basis for systematic comparative analysis, thereby enabling future research into a previously under-examined form of institutional disruption.

First empirical analysis of determinants of autocoups: Utilising this newly compiled dataset, the thesis undertakes the first empirical examination of the structural and institutional conditions under which autocoups are likely to occur. The analysis finds that leaders operating within power-concentrated systems—particularly presidential democracies and personalist regimes—are significantly more prone to extending their tenure through autocoups than those operating in other regime types. These findings contribute to the literature on the relationship between regime characteristics and irregular power retention, highlighting the critical role of

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institutional structures in shaping leaders' strategic decisions to override term limits.

Comparative analysis of leadership longevity between coup-installed and autocoup leaders: The research further contributes to the study of leadership survival by comparing the tenure durations of leaders who attain power through coups with those who extend it via autocoups. Employing survival analysis on both the coup and autocoup datasets, the study finds that, contrary to the assumption, the method of power acquisition is not a significant predictor of leadership longevity. However, it reaffirms that regime type plays a decisive role in leader survival, irrespective of the mode of accession or retention. The survival models indicate that leaders within military regimes exhibit a higher hazard ratio of removal compared to those in dominant-party regimes. These results underscore the influence of regime structure on leadership durability and elite turnover.

Comparative democratic implications of coups and autocoups: The thesis also investigates the differential impacts of coups and autocoups on democratic development. Employing country-fixed effects regression models and utilising Polity V scores as an indicator of democratic quality, the analysis finds that autocoups are consistently associated with gradual and sustained democratic erosion—both preceding and following the event. In contrast, coups yield more heterogeneous institutional outcomes. While they often result in immediate setbacks to democratic norms, in certain instances they facilitate democratic transitions, including shifts from autocracy to democracy. This disaggregated analysis reveals the distinct trajectories and institutional consequences engendered by different forms of irregular power transitions.

1.3 Policy implications

Although scholarly debate persists regarding the potential for coups to inadvertently foster democratisation under certain conditions (C. L. Thyne and Powell 2014; Derpanopoulos et al. 2016; Miller 2016), there exists a strong policy consensus that coups constitute inherently illegitimate mechanisms of political change. As violent disruptions of constitutional order,

they tend to inflict immediate institutional damage, precipitate instability, and lead to unpredictable political trajectories. Accordingly, both international and domestic policy responses have rightly prioritised prevention—most notably through "coup-proofing" strategies designed to insulate regimes from military intervention or elite defection (Quinlivan 1999; Pilster and Böhmelt 2012; Jonathan M. Powell, n.d.; Albrecht 2014a; Carey, Colaresi, and Mitchell 2015; C. S. Brown, Fariss, and McMahon 2015; Sudduth 2017). However, as this thesis demonstrates, such approaches have well-documented limitations (Albrecht 2014b; Reiter 2020), and deeper structural power dynamics within regimes are frequently more decisive in determining vulnerability to both coups and autocoups.

The findings of this study yield several important policy implications, particularly concerning institutional design, international responses, and the monitoring of democratic backsliding. These implications will be discussed in detail in the concluding chapter.

1.4 Limitations and future research

Whilst this study proposes a novel analytical framework for understanding coups and autocoups, their effects on leadership survival, and their broader institutional implications, several limitations remain, indicating important directions for future research and refinement.

A core challenge concerns the conceptual ambiguity that surrounds the very definition of autocoups—particularly in borderline cases where incumbents extend their authority through legal or quasi-legal mechanisms. Future work might explore the normative and analytical trade-offs involved in including such cases within the autocoup category. Comparative analyses of 'unconstitutional' versus 'extra-constitutional' extensions of executive tenure may assist in clarifying whether these actions constitute variants of the same phenomenon or represent analytically distinct processes. The case of President Manuel Zelaya of Honduras in 2009, whose attempt to amend the constitution to allow future re-election led to his removal by a military coup (Muñoz-Portillo and Treminio 2019), illustrates the analytical complexity of identifying

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autocoups and underscores the necessity of refining coding criteria and interpretive clarity in future data collection efforts.

Given the long-term decline in traditional coups and the parallel rise of autocoups, increased scholarly attention to the latter is imperative. While this study focuses on tenure extension as the defining feature of autocoups, broader forms of executive power expansion—whether within or beyond the formal constitutional framework—merit systematic investigation. To capture the full range of such practices, the development of a dedicated dataset on executive power expansion represents a crucial next step.

Moreover, the decreasing frequency of overt and dramatic regime transitions since the early 2000s has coincided with a decline in unambiguous shifts between democracy and autocracy. This trend highlights the necessity of more sensitive instruments capable of detecting incremental changes within regimes. Future empirical research should focus on identifying and measuring such subtler transformations.

These limitations and promising avenues for future inquiry will be explored in greater detail in the concluding chapter.

1.5   Overview of the thesis

This thesis examines the complex power dynamics underlying coups and autocoups, with a particular focus on their consequences for leadership survival and the democratisation or authoritarian transformation of political regimes. It develops a unified analytical framework to study these phenomena as distinct yet interconnected forms of irregular power transition. Each chapter contributes to this overarching inquiry by offering conceptual clarifications, empirical innovations, and comparative insights.

Chapter 2: Autocoups: Conceptual Clarification and Dataset Introduction

Despite the increasing incidence of autocoups—particularly in the post-Cold War era—their systematic study remains underdeveloped. Existing scholarship suffers from conceptual fragmentation, characterised by a proliferation of overlapping and inconsistently defined terms ('self-coup', autogolpe, 'executive aggrandisement', etc.) (Marsteintredet and Malamud 2019; Baturo and Tolstrup 2022). This conceptual ambiguity complicates empirical analysis, as many datasets fail to distinguish between tenure extension and other forms of executive power consolidation—an essential distinction for this study. As a result, methodological progress has been hindered, with most existing research relying on qualitative case studies (Maxwell A. Cameron 1998b; Antonio 2021; Pion-Berlin, Bruneau, and Goetze 2022), rather than large-N analyses.

This chapter addresses these limitations by proposing a more precise and theoretically grounded definition of the autocoup. It contends that autocoups should be defined as attempts by incumbents to extend their constitutionally mandated terms of office. By centring the definition on tenure extension, the concept excludes broader forms of executive aggrandisement that occur within existing constitutional time-frames, and aligns autocoups conceptually with classic coups, both of which involve disruptions to constitutionally prescribed leadership succession. Accordingly, this study defines **an autocoup as the extension of an incumbent leader's tenure beyond its original constitutional limit, achieved through extra-constitutional means**.

Based on this refined definition, the chapter presents a significant empirical contribution: a newly compiled global dataset of autocoups spanning the period 1945 to 2023, identifying 83 distinct events, of which 64 were successful. This dataset facilitates systematic quantitative analysis and opens new avenues for comparative research on irregular retention of power.

Chapter 3: Power Dynamics and Autocoup Attempts

Due to long-standing conceptual and empirical constraints, existing discussions of autocoups have relied largely on case-based approaches (Baturo and Elgie, n.d.; Marsteintredet and Malamud 2019; Baturo and Tolstrup 2022). The dataset introduced in Chapter 2 enables, for the first time, a large-N analysis of the structural conditions underpinning autocoup attempts.

Drawing upon insights from the coup literature, this chapter investigates a range of potential predictors—including economic performance, succession rules, military influence, protest activity, and media freedom. While these variables have been analysed in the context of traditional coups, they often fail to account for persistent cross-regime variation or the limited efficacy of so-called 'coup-proofing' strategies (Albrecht 2014b; Reiter 2020). Moreover, many studies adopt overly simplistic regime typologies (e.g. democracy versus autocracy, or civilian versus military), thereby obscuring important variation within regime types (Hiroi and Omori 2013; Schiel 2019).

This chapter advances the argument that autocoup risk is shaped fundamentally by the structural balance of power embedded in a regime's founding configuration. Specifically, the likelihood of an autocoup is determined by the equilibrium between incumbents and potential institutional challengers—a balance largely set at regime inception (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014). To test this proposition, regime typologies are employed as proxies for internal power structures.

Using both a standard logit model and a bias-reduced logit model (Firth's penalised maximum likelihood estimation), the analysis reveals that presidential democracies and personalist regimes are significantly more prone to autocoup attempts than dominant-party regimes, when other variables are held constant. Leaders in dominant-party and military regimes, by contrast, do not significantly differ in their likelihood of attempting an autocoup. These findings underscore the centrality of regime type in shaping elite incentives for irregular tenure extension.

Chapter 4: Power Acquisition and Leadership Survival: A Comparative Analysis of Coup-installed and Autocoup Leaders

Although a substantial body of literature has explored the tenure survival of leaders who come to power through coups (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Sudduth 2017; Easton and Siverson 2018), the absence of comparable data on autocoups has long precluded systematic comparisons between coup-installed leaders and those who prolong their rule via autocoups. This chapter addresses that gap by offering the first comparative survival analysis of these two categories within a unified theoretical framework.

It argues that coup leaders typically face heightened legitimacy deficits, political uncertainty, and institutional instability, whereas autocoup leaders benefit from institutional continuity while simultaneously removing key constraints. These distinct conditions shape divergent pathways to political consolidation.

Surprisingly, the time-dependent Cox model shows no statistically significant difference in survival risk between coup-installed and autocoup leaders once relevant covariates—especially regime type—are taken into account. Rather, regime characteristics exert a decisive influence on leadership tenure: leaders in military and transitional regimes face significantly higher risks of removal than those in dominant-party regimes.

Chapter 5: Coups, autocoups, and democracy

While the impact of coups on democratisation has received considerable scholarly attention (Clayton and Onwumechili 2000; Jonathan M. Powell 2014; C. Thyne and Hitch 2020), the consequences of autocoups remain understudied due to the historical absence of relevant data. This chapter addresses this lacuna through a quantitative analysis of how coups and autocoups affect democratic institutions.

Whereas coups may produce leadership turnover or even regime change, autocoups typically involve incumbents dismantling institutional constraints without altering the core ruling

coalition. Consequently, their effects are best assessed not by regime-type transitions, but by shifts in continuous measures of democratic quality, such as Polity V scores.

Two key claims are advanced. First, leaders often begin to erode institutional checks in anticipation of an autocoup, resulting in declines in Polity scores prior to the event itself. Second, while coups exhibit mixed outcomes—sometimes enabling democratisation—autocoups almost invariably result in democratic erosion or deeper authoritarian consolidation.

Empirical analysis using a country-fixed effects model confirms that autocoups are associated with consistent declines in democratic quality both before and after the event. By contrast, coups tend to cause an immediate drop in Polity scores, although in some cases democratic recovery follows. These findings highlight the uniquely insidious nature of autocoups, which often proceed incrementally and under a legalistic façade.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and future research directions

The concluding chapter synthesises the findings of the preceding chapters, drawing attention to the structural, strategic, and institutional dynamics that underpin irregular leadership transitions. It contends that coups and autocoups are not simply disruptive events, but strategic tools employed by elites to recalibrate or entrench political authority. Their institutional legacies diverge: while coups often destabilise regimes, autocoups typically consolidate autocratic rule.

This chapter outlines the broader implications of these findings for understanding the resilience of autocracy, the vulnerability of democratic institutions, and the strategic calculus of political leaders. It also proposes several directions for future research.

First, the broader phenomenon of executive power expansion—whether or not it involves tenure extension—warrants systematic investigation. Given its increasing frequency and corrosive institutional effects, the development of a dedicated dataset on power expansions is strongly recommended.

Second, as full regime transitions become less common, future research should focus on

detecting subtle, incremental changes in political quality. Fine-grained indicators—such as modest shifts in Polity scores—will be essential for monitoring democratic backsliding and institutional recovery in hybrid or semi-authoritarian regimes.

Chapter 2

Autocoups: Conceptual Clarification and Dataset Introduction

Abstract

This chapter presents a refined conceptualisation of autocoups, defined as instances in which incumbent leaders extend their constitutionally mandated tenure through extra-constitutional means, typically by circumventing or violating term limits. By critically reviewing and synthesising overlapping terms—such as self-coup, autogolpe, and executive takeover—the chapter delineates the conceptual boundaries of the phenomenon, identifying tenure extension as its defining characteristic. In distinguishing autocoups from broader and more ambiguous forms of executive aggrandisement, it advances a more analytically precise framework for studying irregular power extensions. Building on this conceptual foundation, the chapter introduces a novel global dataset of autocoup events from 1945 to 2023, identifying 83 distinct cases, of which 64 were successful. This empirical contribution enables systematic, large-N analysis of an increasingly salient mode of authoritarian consolidation.

Keywords: *Autocoups, Coups, Irregular Power Transitions, Leadership Tenure, Dataset*

2.1 Introduction

The stability and resilience of political systems rest fundamentally on the orderly transfer of power. When leadership succession takes place within established constitutional frameworks, it reinforces the legitimacy and durability of governing institutions. Conversely, the breakdown of these norms and mechanisms often precipitates political violence, institutional erosion, and prolonged instability.

While many leadership transitions occur without disruption, a considerable proportion do not. In particular, authoritarian regimes and fragile democracies frequently experience two principal forms of irregular leadership outcomes: the premature removal of incumbents and the extension of power beyond constitutional limits.

The former—forced removals of leaders prior to the completion of their terms—has been extensively examined under the broader category of irregular leadership transitions. These events have profound consequences for regime stability, democratic legitimacy, and institutional development. Accordingly, understanding their causes and implications remains a core concern within political science.

The extant literature identifies a range of precipitating factors, including civil war (Kokkonen and Sundell 2019), international conflict (Mesquita and Siverson 1995), ethnic cleavages (Londregan, Bienen, and Walle 1995), poor economic performance (Miller 2012; Krishnarajan 2019), and natural disasters (Quiroz Flores and Smith 2012). Among these, however, coups d'état—typically defined as illegal and overt attempts by the military or state elites to depose a sitting executive (Powell and Thyne 2011)—stand out as the most frequent and consequential source of leadership change. In autocratic contexts, they account for approximately one-third of all leader exits, surpassing even regular transitions (Frantz and Stein 2016), while roughly two-thirds of non-constitutional removals in dictatorships are attributable to coups (Svolik 2009). Unsurprisingly, coups have attracted considerable scholarly attention. Researchers have explored their structural determinants, proximate triggers, aftermath, and effects on democratic

consolidation and economic development (Thyne and Powell 2019).

Yet this focus on traditional coups risks overlooking a distinct and increasingly salient form of irregular transition: the autocoup. In this chapter, an autocoup is defined as an instance in which an incumbent leader extends their tenure by subverting or bypassing constitutional term limits through extra-constitutional means. Despite their rising incidence—particularly since the end of the Cold War—autocoups remain under-theorised and under-examined. Conceptual fragmentation has impeded progress, with a proliferation of overlapping and inconsistently applied terms such as self-coup, autogolpe, and executive aggrandisement (Marsteintredet and Malamud 2019; Baturo and Tolstrup 2022). This lack of definitional precision complicates data collection and comparative analysis. Existing datasets often conflate tenure extensions with broader forms of executive power consolidation, thereby failing to isolate the specific mechanisms this study seeks to analyse (Baturo and Tolstrup 2022). Consequently, scholarship has tended to rely on qualitative case studies (Maxwell A. Cameron 1998b; Antonio 2021; Pion-Berlin, Bruneau, and Goetze 2022), limiting the field's capacity for broader generalisation.

This chapter contends that these conceptual and empirical limitations obscure a crucial dimension of contemporary politics. It thus proposes a unified analytical framework for examining coups and autocoups as distinct yet comparable strategies for undermining constitutional norms governing leadership succession. This comparative approach is warranted on three grounds.

First, both coups and autocoups constitute fundamental breaches of constitutional order, with significant implications for democratic resilience, political legitimacy, and institutional integrity. Analysing them in tandem facilitates a systematic examination of how different forms of irregular power transition shape trajectories of political development and democratisation.

Second, while both disrupt established norms of succession, they operate in opposite directions relative to the incumbent: coups terminate leadership prematurely, whereas autocoups extend it beyond its constitutionally mandated limit. This contrast offers a valuable lens through which to explore the mechanisms of political survival and authoritarian consolidation.

Third, a comparative framework helps to illuminate pressing contemporary puzzles. For instance, how can the marked decline in coup frequency since the 1990s (Bermeo 2016) be reconciled with the sustained erosion of democratic governance—now in its eighteenth consecutive year (Freedom House 2024)? By incorporating autocoups into the analytical schema, this study highlights the growing significance of incremental, procedural subversions of democracy, often orchestrated from within the existing legal and institutional architecture.

To address these gaps, the chapter makes two principal contributions. First, it offers conceptual clarification by redefining autocoups as a subtype of irregular leadership transition centred specifically on extra-constitutional tenure extension. This refined definition distinguishes autocoups from broader, more diffuse forms of executive aggrandisement. Second, it introduces a novel global dataset of autocoup events from 1945 to 2023, compiled in accordance with this reconceptualised framework, thereby enabling the first systematic large-N analysis of the phenomenon.

The remainder of the chapter is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews existing definitions related to power extension and executive aggrandisement, culminating in a revised conceptualisation of autocoups. Section 3 introduces the new dataset, detailing its scope, coding criteria, and methodological foundations. Section 4 presents an initial analysis through descriptive statistics and illustrative case studies. The conclusion synthesises the chapter's key contributions and outlines directions for future research.

2.2   literature review and clarification of definitions

A significant limitation in the study of irregular leadership transitions lies in the insufficient integration of research on conventional coups and autocoups. While both constitute critical mechanisms of extra-constitutional power transfer, they have typically been examined in isolation, with limited attention paid to their conceptual and empirical intersections.

This disjunction primarily arises from two factors: the historical under-recognition of au-

tocoups as a distinct subtype of irregular transition, and the enduring conceptual ambiguity surrounding their definition. Whereas classic coups are generally characterised by the abrupt removal of incumbents, autocoups typically involve incumbent-led efforts to retain or expand power by circumventing constitutional constraints. However, the inconsistent usage of overlapping terms—such as 'self-coup', autogolpe, and 'executive aggrandisement'—has further muddied these distinctions.

Clarifying the definition of autocoups is thus a necessary step towards constructing a comparative framework capable of capturing the full spectrum of irregular power transitions. This section undertakes that task by distinguishing autocoups from broader forms of executive power consolidation, and by conceptually aligning them with traditional coups through their shared transgression of constitutional norms.

Terminology

Studies of autocoups employ a wide range of terms to describe the extension of power or tenure by incumbent leaders. The most commonly used is 'self-coup', or autogolpe in Spanish (Przeworski et al. 2000; Maxwell A. Cameron 1998a; Bermeo 2016; Helmke 2017; Marsteintredet and Malamud 2019). This term gained scholarly prominence following the actions of Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori in 1992, who dissolved Congress, temporarily suspended the constitution, and ruled by decree (Mauceri 1995; Maxwell A. Cameron 1998b). However, as Marsteintredet and Malamud (2019) rightly notes, 'self-coup' is a potentially misleading label, as it implies that the leader acts against themselves, whereas such moves are typically aimed at other state institutions or constitutional constraints.

A second category of terminology includes expressions 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 descriptors may offer insights into specific mechanisms or contexts, their proliferation often leads to

conceptual confusion. Many centre on the method of power acquisition but fail to consistently identify the perpetrator. Moreover, such mechanisms—judicial rulings, legislative manoeuvres, or administrative decrees—may be employed either by or against executive actors, further complicating classification.

A third group of terms includes phrases such as 'incumbent takeover', 'executive takeover', and 'overstay'. For instance, incumbent takeover refers to "an event perpetuated by a ruling executive that significantly reduces the formal and/or informal constraints on his/her power" (Baturo and Tolstrup 2022, 374), drawing on earlier work by Svolik (2014). Similarly, overstay denotes "staying longer than the maximum term as it stood when the candidate originally came into office" (Ginsburg, Melton, and Elkins 2011, 1844). These terms help to clarify the identity of the actor (the incumbent) and the nature of the action (power consolidation or term extension), yet they often fail to convey the illegality or unconstitutionality of such actions. In contrast to 'coup', which inherently implies an unlawful seizure of power, labels such as 'takeover' or 'overstay' may inadvertently understate the normative gravity of the events they describe.

Given that many existing terms tend to prioritise procedural mechanisms over normative considerations, or even conflate legal and extra-legal practices, this study posits 'autocoup' as the most precise and analytically coherent term. This term offers several key advantages.

Definitional clarity and addressing the core essence: 'Autocoup' precisely denotes an incumbent leader's extension of their political tenure through extra-constitutional means. This definition clearly distinguishes it from conventional coups, typically initiated by external actors such as the military, and from other, more diffuse or ill-defined instances of executive aggrandisement.

Emphasis on severity and normative implications: The suffix '-coup' powerfully signifies the grave breach of constitutional order inherent in such actions. In both academic research and policy assessment contexts, the level of disruption and impact is no less than, and may even exceed, that of conventional coups, thereby imbuing the term with appropriate normative and critical weight.

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Accurate identification of the perpetrator: The prefix 'auto-' directly identifies the incumbent leader as the instigator of such events. This stands in stark contrast to conventional coups, which are typically orchestrated by actors external to the incumbent's immediate circle, such as the military or opposition factions, thereby facilitating precise attribution.

Promotion of conceptual coherence and comparative analysis: 'Autocoup' shares an etymological root with 'coup', ensuring an intrinsic conceptual link and logical consistency. This enables systematic comparative analysis of different yet related forms of irregular leadership transition within a unified analytical framework, thereby deepening the understanding of these phenomena.

In summary, the term 'autocoup' not only pinpoints with precision both the actor and the act itself but also clearly reveals the illegitimacy and gravity of the behaviour, alongside its intrinsic theoretical connections to conventional coups. It therefore stands as the most accurate and analytically potent conceptual tool for capturing and analysing such political phenomena, aligning perfectly with the unified analytical framework this study seeks to establish.

Definition

While the use of precise terminology is undoubtedly important, a further significant issue in previous definitions of autocoups lies in the identification of their primary characteristic: is the central feature the expansion of power, the extension of tenure, or a combination of both? This question arises from the marked ambiguity surrounding existing definitions of autocoups and related concepts.

Within political science, the notions of power expansion and tenure extension frequently overlap or are applied ambiguously, thereby contributing to conceptual confusion. To promote greater clarity, it is essential to delineate these two frameworks more rigorously. Power expansion refers to the process by which an incumbent accrues authority beyond their original constitutional remit—typically through centralisation, the weakening of institutional checks

and balances, or encroachments upon other branches of the state, such as the legislature or judiciary. Tenure extension, by contrast, concerns efforts by a leader to remain in office beyond the term originally prescribed, often via constitutional amendments, the postponement or manipulation of elections, or other mechanisms intended to bypass term limits.

Many existing definitions of autocoups conflate these dynamics or disproportionately emphasise power expansion. For instance, Maxwell A. Cameron (1998a) defines a self-coup 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" (p. 220). Yet the concept of "broader executive power" is inherently vague and open to contestation. Similarly, the term incumbent takeover, defined as "an event perpetuated by a ruling executive that significantly reduces the formal and/or informal constraints on his/her power" (Baturo and Tolstrup 2022, 374), builds on earlier work by Svolik (2014) and centres on power expansion as well. However, the dataset employing this definition encompasses both power expansion and tenure extension. By contrast, the term overstay is clearly defined as "staying longer than the maximum term as it stood when the candidate originally came into office" (Ginsburg, Melton, and Elkins 2011, 1844), thereby focusing specifically on tenure extension.

This thesis contends that tenure extension ought to be regarded as the primary and defining characteristic of an autocoup, for several reasons. First, this focus aligns autocoups conceptually with traditional coups. A classic coup is typically characterised by the forcible and premature removal of a sitting executive; it does not necessarily entail a reduction in the leader's powers, but rather a disruption of their tenure. By the same logic, an autocoup should be defined by the prolongation of tenure, not solely by the expansion of executive authority. An incumbent may experience a diminution of power while remaining in office—such an instance would not be coded as a coup. Similarly, a leader who consolidates authority without exceeding term limits would fall under the category of executive aggrandisement, but not that of an autocoup.

Second, in practice, power expansion often functions as a strategic means to enable tenure

extension. The widely cited case of President Alberto Fujimori in Peru exemplifies this dynamic. Although his 1992 actions involved the suspension of the constitution and the dissolution of Congress, the ultimate objective was to ensure continued rule. The 1993 Constitution permitted him to seek a second term, which he won in 1995. Subsequently, a law of "authentic interpretation" passed by his congressional allies enabled him to run again in 2000—a move steeped in controversy. Although he secured re-election, his regime collapsed in 2000 amidst corruption and human rights scandals, prompting his flight to Japan (Ezrow 2019). In this light, it is illogical for incumbents to consolidate power unless they intend to overstay in office; such actions merely strengthen their successors, whose interests may diverge from their own.

Third, the measurement of power expansion presents greater methodological challenges than the identification of tenure extension. For example, Maxwell A. Cameron (1998a) defines a self-coup as involving both constitutional suspension and congressional dissolution. Yet it remains unclear whether either act alone constitutes an autocoup, whether both are required, or whether they should be treated as distinct events. While the complexity of measurement ought not to preclude the consideration of power expansion, a clear point of departure is required. This study therefore designates tenure extension as the definitional core of autocoups, leaving the broader discussion of power expansion (and its inverse, power contraction) to future research.

Based on these considerations, this study defines an autocoup as **the extension of an incumbent leader's tenure in office beyond the originally mandated limit, achieved through extra-constitutional means.**

This definition places tenure extension at the centre of the concept, while acknowledging that power expansion may coexist. First, the term incumbent leader refers to the de facto national leader, irrespective of their formal title. For instance, although Vladimir Putin formally stepped down as President of Russia in 2008 and assumed the premiership, effective political power remained in his hands. During this period, the presidency—held by Dmitry Medvedev—functioned largely as a symbolic office under Putin's continued control (Chaisty 2019). To ensure consistency and minimise arbitrariness, this study employs the Archigos dataset (Goemans,

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Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009) to determine whether an incumbent has effectively remained in power.

Second, although tenure extension is the definitional cornerstone, this framework does not exclude simultaneous power expansion. Both may occur in tandem, but the decisive criterion remains the act of exceeding one's original time in office. In the Fujimori case, for example, the 1992 actions were not coded as an autocoup until the adoption of the 1993 constitutional amendment enabling his re-election.

Third, autocoups may be executed through both legal and illegal means. For instance, Chadian President François Tombalbaye postponed general elections until 1969 after coming to power in 1960. Similarly, Angolan President José Eduardo dos Santos suspended elections during much of his nearly four-decade rule (Baturo and Elgie, n.d.). These represent clear violations of constitutional norms. Other instances—such as Putin's 2008 manoeuvre—may not be overtly illegal but nonetheless undermine the constitutional spirit intended to limit consecutive terms. Consequently, this definition emphasises the functional illegitimacy of such actions, regardless of their formal legality, particularly where the incumbent is the direct and principal beneficiary.

Finally, an incumbent who seeks re-election in accordance with the existing constitution is not engaging in an autocoup. However, should they subsequently refuse to concede defeat and remain in power beyond their lawful mandate, such conduct would indeed constitute an autocoup.

By clarifying these definitional boundaries, this chapter establishes the conceptual foundation for the autocoup dataset introduced in the following section.

2.3 Introduction to the autocoup dataset

Defining the scope

Classifying political events as autocoups often necessitates addressing ambiguous or borderline cases. To ensure consistency and minimise interpretive uncertainty, this study adopts a coding strategy grounded in the definition articulated in the preceding section. Specifically, only those instances in which incumbent leaders extend their originally mandated term in office are coded as autocoups. Cases involving power consolidation in the absence of tenure extension are excluded from the dataset.

The temporal scope of the dataset spans the period from 1945 to the end of 2023, reflecting the most recent data available at the time of compilation. The geographical scope is global, encompassing leaders from all countries and regions.

Classifying autocoups

In categorising autocoups, this study prioritises the methods employed by incumbents, while outcomes constitute a secondary classificatory dimension. Additional features are recorded where relevant information is available.

Evasion of term limits

One of the most prevalent tactics in autocoups is the evasion of term limits. Incumbents deploy ostensibly legal mechanisms to prolong their hold on power, primarily through the manipulation of constitutional provisions. Such manoeuvres may include pressuring legislatures or courts to reinterpret term limits, amending the constitution to allow extended terms, or replacing the constitution entirely. In some instances, referendums are employed to confer a veneer of democratic legitimacy. These extensions may range from the addition of a single term to indefinite tenure.

Changing the length of a term: Incumbents may increase the duration of a single term (e.g., from four to six years) without altering the number of terms permitted. Examples include President David Dacko (Central African Republic, 1962), President Grégoire Kayibanda (Rwanda, 1973), and President Augusto Pinochet (Chile, 1988).

Enabling re-election: This involves modifying constitutional or legal frameworks to permit re-election where it was previously barred. For instance, President Carlos Menem of Argentina amended the constitution in 1993 to allow himself to seek re-election, thereby extending his tenure.

Abolishing term limits: President Paul Biya of Cameroon successfully removed presidential term limits in 2008, thereby enabling indefinite re-election.

Declaring leadership for life: This approach retains the semblance of electoral competition, albeit often through manipulated or uncontested elections. President Sukarno of Indonesia attempted to declare himself president for life in 1963, although this effort ultimately failed.

These strategies are frequently deployed in combination. For example, President François Duvalier of Haiti first amended the constitution in 1961 to permit immediate re-election and subsequently declared himself president for life in 1964.

Electoral manipulation and rigging

The second most frequently observed strategy in autocoups involves the manipulation of electoral processes to ensure the incumbent remains in office.

Delaying or cancelling elections: The postponement of scheduled elections without legitimate justification is a recurrent tactic. President François Tombalbaye of Chad delayed general elections until 1969, having come to power in 1960. Similarly, President José Eduardo dos Santos of Angola suspended elections throughout his tenure from 1979 to 2017.

Rejecting unfavourable electoral outcomes: Incumbents may refuse to concede defeat and attempt to remain in office by unconstitutional means. A prominent example is President Donald Trump of the United States, who declined to accept the results of the 2020 presidential

election and sought to overturn them.

Electoral rigging: Securing implausibly high vote shares is a key indicator of electoral manipulation. This study codes elections in which incumbents receive over 90% of the vote as indicative of an autocoup. President Teodoro Obiang of Equatorial Guinea has consistently achieved over 95% in multiparty elections since 1996.

Exclusion of opposition: Preventing opposition parties or candidates from contesting elections—thereby converting them into de facto uncontested contests—is considered a clear indicator of an autocoup.

Installation of a figurehead

Some incumbents seek to circumvent term limits by installing a trusted proxy or figurehead, thereby retaining de facto control over state affairs while relinquishing formal office.

A paradigmatic example is the 2008 presidential transition in Russia. Confronted with constitutional term limits, President Vladimir Putin endorsed Dmitry Medvedev as his successor, who was duly elected. Medvedev then appointed Putin as Prime Minister. Despite the formal shift in roles, most analysts agree that Putin retained substantial influence, effectively rendering Medvedev a figurehead.

It is important that the identification of such cases be grounded in objective criteria to avoid arbitrary classification. Accordingly, this study relies on the Archigos dataset (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009) to determine leadership status. If a former officeholder is not recorded in Archigos as the country's leader—despite wielding informal power—they are not coded as engaging in a figurehead-style autocoup within this dataset.

Reassignment of supreme authority

This strategy entails restructuring the constitutional or legal framework to create a new, more powerful office, which the incumbent subsequently assumes after formally leaving their original post.

In 2017, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan orchestrated a constitutional referendum that transformed Turkey from a parliamentary to a presidential system. The newly empowered presidency carried significantly enhanced executive authority. Erdoğan then ran for, and won, the redefined presidency, thereby maintaining control under a revised institutional arrangement.

One-time extension arrangements

In certain cases, bespoke arrangements are enacted to extend an incumbent's tenure without altering the broader constitutional framework. These arrangements are explicitly tailored to the current officeholder, with institutional rules on tenure or term limits intended to resume their standard application for future leaders. For example, in 2004, Lebanon extended President Émile Lahoud's term by three years through a one-off legal provision applying solely to his incumbency.

Data coding

The autocoup dataset is constructed on the basis of established datasets and scholarly literature, thereby ensuring both reliability and comprehensiveness. The principal sources employed for coding are listed in Table Table 2.1.

The Archigos dataset (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009) and the Political Leaders' Affiliation Database (PLAD) (Bomprezzi et al. 2024) offer detailed records of national leaders from 1875 to 2023. Although the temporal focus of this study is limited to events occurring from 1945 onwards, these datasets are essential for identifying de facto leaders and distinguishing them from nominal heads of state.

The Incumbent Takeover dataset (Baturo and Tolstrup 2022), which synthesises information from eleven separate sources, provides a broad inventory of cases wherein executive actors significantly curtailed institutional constraints on their authority. As this dataset encompasses both

Table 2.1: Main Data Sources for Coding the Autocoup Dataset

Dataset	Authors	Coverage	Obervations
Archigos	Goemans et al (2009)	1875-2015	3409
PLAD	Bomprezzi et al. (2024)	1989-2023	1334
Incumbent Takeover	Baturo and Tolstrup (2022)	1913-2019	279

power consolidation and tenure extension cases, cross-referencing with Archigos (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009) and PLAD (Bomprezzi et al. 2024) was necessary to determine whether individual cases satisfied the definitional criteria for an autocoup.

In total, 83 events were identified and coded as autocoups. Of these, 50 correspond to entries within the Incumbent Takeover dataset, while the remaining 33 were newly identified and coded by the author through cross-verification with supplementary materials, including Archigos (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009), PLAD (Bomprezzi et al. 2024), and contemporary news sources.

Although a majority of cases originate from the Incumbent Takeover dataset, the present study does not constitute a replication of that work. Of the 279 cases catalogued in Incumbent Takeover, 229 were excluded from the current analysis on the grounds that they entailed power consolidation without any accompanying attempt to extend the leader's tenure. Such instances lie beyond the definitional scope of autocoups as operationalised in this thesis. This conceptual refinement constitutes the principal point of departure from the Incumbent Takeover framework.

The final dataset comprises 14 structured variables, in addition to a free-text field for supplementary notes. The variables are as follows:

- **Country identification:** Country code (ccode) and country name (country), following the standards of the Correlates of War project (Stinnett et al. 2002).

- **Leader information:** Name of the de facto leader (leader_name), coded in accordance with the conventions employed in the Archigos (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009) and PLAD (Bomprezzi et al. 2024) datasets.

- **Timeline variables:** Date the leader assumed office (entry_date), date of departure (exit_date), date of the autocoup-defining event (autocoup_date), and commencement date of the extended term (extending_date).

- **Power transition methods:** Mode of accession (entry_method), mode of departure (exit_method), and binary indicators for regular or irregular entry (entry_regular) and exit (exit_regular).

- **Autocoup characteristics:** Method of tenure extension (autocoup_method) and outcome of the attempt (autocoup_outcome), categorised as: "failed and removed from office", "failed but completed original tenure", or "successful". For successful cases, the duration of the additional term is calculated as the interval between extending_date and exit_date.

- **Data source:** The principal dataset from which the case was coded (source).

- **Additional notes:** Contextual commentary on exceptional or borderline cases (notes).

Several coding challenges and methodological decisions warrant further elaboration. In instances where tenure extensions occurred incrementally, the `autocoup_date` corresponds to a pivotal event—such as the passage of a constitutional amendment, a legislative vote, or the outcome of a referendum. Where leaders attempted multiple autocoups, details are consolidated in the notes field. Particular care was taken to distinguish between mere power consolidation and explicit efforts to prolong tenure, which necessitated triangulation across multiple sources. Furthermore, assessing the success or failure of an autocoup—particularly in under-reported contexts—frequently required extensive background research and qualitative judgment.

Data descriptions

The primary coding process identified 83 instances of autocoups between 1945 and 2023, spanning 63 countries. This comprehensive dataset provides a robust empirical foundation for

Table 2.2: Autocoup methods and success rates (1945-2023)

Autocoup Method	Attempted	Succeeded	Success Rate
Enabling re-election	37	26	70.3%
Removing term limits	10	10	100.0%
Leader for life	7	7	100.0%
Delaying elections	5	5	100.0%
One-time arrangement	5	4	80.0%
Changing term length	5	4	80.0%
Reassigning power role	4	2	50.0%
Refusing election results	3	0	0.0%
Figurehead	3	3	100.0%
Cancelling elections	3	3	100.0%
Rigging elections	1	0	0.0%
Total	83	64	77.1%

Source: Autocoup dataset

analysing trends and patterns in autocoup attempts across a wide array of political and institutional contexts.

A breakdown of the methods employed by incumbents to extend their tenure is presented in Table 2.2. The most prevalent strategy is the legalisation or reintroduction of re-election, accounting for 37 cases. This is followed by the removal of term limits (10 cases) and the declaration of the leader as president for life (7 cases). Other tactics, such as the cancellation of scheduled elections or the refusal to concede electoral defeat, appear less frequently. Electoral rigging is recorded in only one case—primarily because it is often difficult to verify with certainty, despite strong indications in many instances.

Autocoups exhibit a notably high overall success rate of 77%, in stark contrast to the approximate 50% success rate observed in classical military coups. Several factors may explain this discrepancy. First, incumbents possess direct access to state resources and institutional mechanisms, which can be deployed strategically to their advantage. Second, in contrast to the abrupt and confrontational nature of traditional coups, autocoups tend to unfold gradually and deliberately, affording incumbents time to consolidate elite support and cultivate public

legitimacy. Third, many autocoup strategies are implemented under the guise of legality—via constitutional amendments or judicial rulings—which reduces overt resistance and complicates efforts to mobilise effective opposition. Finally, incumbents typically exercise considerable influence over key state institutions, including the judiciary, legislature, and security services, which facilitates the planning and consolidation of such actions.

However, success rates differ markedly depending on the method employed. Certain strategies appear to be consistently effective. For example, removing term limits, cancelling elections, declaring oneself leader for life, delaying elections, and installing figurehead successors all exhibit a 100% success rate within the dataset. Notably, these approaches represent some of the most flagrant violations of constitutional norms concerning executive succession. This pattern suggests that outcomes are shaped less by the degree of legal or constitutional transgression than by the underlying distribution of political power. In other words, the success of an autocoup is determined not by the legality of the act, but by the incumbent's capacity to control coercive, judicial, and legislative institutions. Leaders who command overwhelming authority are both willing and able to disregard constitutional constraints precisely because their dominance insulates them from meaningful resistance.

By contrast, refusal to accept electoral defeat exhibits the lowest success rate, with only one of four such attempts proving successful. Although the sample is limited, this pattern may reflect the greater institutional resilience of electoral democracies, stronger civil society mobilisation, more intensive international scrutiny, and the inherently high-risk nature of overturning electoral outcomes. These factors may increase the probability of failure for incumbents who pursue this path.

Notably, in contrast to classical coups, which predominantly occur in autocratic regimes, a substantial proportion of autocoups take place in democratic settings. Of the 83 identified autocoup attempts, 30 took place in democracies—of which 29 occurred in presidential democracies—constituting approximately 36% of the total. By comparison, traditional coups have been significantly less frequent in democratic contexts, with only 99 out of 493 cases (

20%) taking place in such regimes. This marked disparity will be examined in greater depth in Chapter 3.

2.4   Case studies

High frequency and success rate of autocoups in post-communist regimes

The dataset reveals a notably high incidence and success rate of autocoup attempts in post-communist states. These countries, which were governed under communist rule prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, have predominantly transitioned into so-called 'hybrid regimes' (Nurumov and Vashchanka 2019), with only a few—most notably China—retaining an overtly communist political identity. Within these contexts, the dataset records 12 attempts by incumbents to extend their tenure, of which only two were unsuccessful. A closer examination of these cases reveals several shared structural and political characteristics.

Firstly, many post-communist regimes inherited authoritarian institutional legacies. While they formally transitioned away from communism, these states often preserved core authoritarian features, particularly the centralisation of executive authority.

Secondly, elite continuity has been a hallmark of post-communist transitions. Rather than a clear break with the previous regime, many transitions saw the retention of former communist elites, who reconstituted themselves within ostensibly democratic frameworks, frequently dominating newly formed political institutions.

Thirdly, democratic procedures have frequently been subverted in post-communist contexts. Although democratic reforms introduced elections and constitutional term limits, the enduring institutional structures of communist rule have often facilitated the manipulation of electoral processes and the circumvention of formal constraints on executive power (Nurumov and Vashchanka 2019).

Lifelong ruler: Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus

Alexander Lukashenko, a former member of the Supreme Soviet of the Byelorussian SSR, rose to national prominence as the head of Belarus's interim anti-corruption committee following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In 1994, he was elected as the country's first president, a position he has held continuously throughout the period under examination. The original 1994 constitution imposed a two-term limit on the presidency; however, this restriction was repealed in 2004 through a constitutional amendment.

Since his initial election, international observers have consistently found that Belarusian elections fall short of democratic standards. Despite sustained domestic opposition and recurrent mass protests, Lukashenko has claimed repeated re-election victories, frequently with vote shares exceeding 80%. This trajectory is emblematic of a broader pattern across the post-Soviet space, particularly in Central Asia, where former high-ranking communist officials transitioned into presidential office and have retained power with limited institutional constraints.

Dynastic succession: Nursultan Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan

Nursultan Nazarbayev served as the first president of independent Kazakhstan from 1991 until 2019. Prior to independence, he was the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan, thereby exercising de facto leadership both before and after the Soviet collapse. Following independence, Nazarbayev was elected president and remained in power through a series of constitutional and legal modifications, including the adoption of new constitutions that effectively reset term limits.

Importantly, Nazarbayev did not formally abolish term limits. Rather, a constitutional exemption was created specifically for the "First President", allowing him to circumvent term restrictions while maintaining a veneer of legal continuity (Nurumov and Vashchanka 2019). Unlike Lukashenko, who has remained in office continuously since 1994 up to the time of this study, Nazarbayev formally resigned in 2019, designating Kassym-Jomart Tokayev as his suc-

cessor. However, Nazarbayev continued to exercise significant influence through his position as Chairman of the Security Council, a role he retained until 2022. This illustrates the persistence of informal executive dominance even after nominal power has been relinquished.

Autocoups for immediate re-election: Cases of Latin America

Latin America has a longstanding tradition of imposing constitutional term limits on executive authority. Simón Bolívar, often regarded as a founding father of several Latin American republics, initially endorsed this principle, declaring in 1819 that "nothing is as dangerous as allowing the same citizen to remain in power for a long time… That is the origin of usurpation and tyranny" (Ginsburg and Elkins 2019, 38). Although Bolívar later revised his stance—asserting in his 1826 address to the Constitutional Assembly that "a president for life with the right to choose the successor is the most sublime inspiration for the republican order"—the concept of term limitation became deeply ingrained in the region's political culture. Indeed, approximately 81% of Latin American constitutions adopted between independence and 1985 included some form of presidential term limit (Marsteintredet 2019).

An analysis of autocoup cases in the region reveals two noteworthy patterns regarding re-election dynamics.

Frequent success in breaking non-re-election rules

Unlike many presidential systems in which two consecutive terms are the norm, Latin American constitutions have historically favoured more restrictive arrangements. According to Marsteintredet (2019), 64.9% of constitutions in the region between independence and 1985 prohibited immediate re-election, while 5.9% forbade re-election altogether.

Nevertheless, adherence to these rules has varied. Countries such as Mexico, which enshrined a strict non-re-election clause in 1911 at the outset of the Mexican Revolution, have consistently upheld this restriction (Klesner 2019). Panama and Uruguay have similarly re-

frained from amending their re-election provisions, while Costa Rica has permitted immediate re-election only briefly (1897–1913) since its initial prohibition in 1859 (Marsteintredet 2019). In contrast, several states have frequently amended or circumvented their constitutional term limits.

The pursuit of re-election or immediate re-election has often served as a central motive for autocoup attempts aimed at consolidating executive power. This study identifies 22 autocoup cases in Latin America, of which 14 (over 63%) involved efforts to enable re-election or immediate re-election. Of these, 9 were successful, yielding a success rate exceeding 64%.

Importantly, not all such leaders sought indefinite tenure. Many stepped down after securing and completing a second term. Notable examples include Fernando Henrique Cardoso (Brazil, 1995–2003), Danilo Medina (Dominican Republic, 2012–2020), and Juan Orlando Hernández (Honduras, 2014–2022) (Ginsburg and Elkins 2019; Marsteintredet 2019; Landau, Roznai, and Dixon 2019; Baturo 2019; Neto and Acácio 2019).

Resistance to further extensions

The relative restraint exhibited by many leaders should not be interpreted as a lack of ambition for further tenure. Rather, it reflects the fact that additional extension attempts often failed, and incumbents acquiesced to these outcomes without resorting to overt manipulation or repression.

While autocoups that enable a single additional term tend to be relatively successful, efforts to prolong tenure beyond two terms encounter greater resistance and are more likely to fail. Two contrasting cases illustrate these divergent trajectories.

Unsuccessful extension–Carlos Menem (Argentina): President Menem secured a second term following a 1994 constitutional amendment permitting one re-election, and he was re-elected in 1995. However, his subsequent attempt to reset the term count—arguing that his first term (1988–1995) had occurred under a previous constitutional framework—was unanimously rejected by the Supreme Court in 1999 (Llanos 2019). A comparable outcome was observed in the case of President Álvaro Uribe in Colombia (2002–2010) (Baturo 2019).

Successful extension–Daniel Ortega (Nicaragua): In contrast, President Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua succeeded in extending his tenure through a series of judicial and legislative manoeuvres. In 2009, the Supreme Court of Justice authorised his candidacy for the 2011 election. Subsequently, in 2014, the National Assembly passed constitutional amendments abolishing presidential term limits, thereby enabling Ortega to pursue indefinite five-year terms. He has remained in office continuously since 2007 (Close 2019).

As common as classical coups: Autocoups in African countries

Classical coups have historically been widespread across the African continent, accounting for approximately 45% of all coups globally—219 out of 493 recorded incidents since 1950—affecting 45 of the 54 African states (Powell and Thyne 2011). While autocoups occur less frequently than traditional coups, they nonetheless represent a significant political phenomenon within Africa. Of the 83 documented cases of autocoups worldwide, 43% (36 cases) have taken place on the continent, spanning 29 countries. Notably, the success rate of African autocoups exceeds 77% (28 out of 36), a figure that significantly surpasses the regional success rate for classical coups (approximately 50%) and aligns with the global average success rate for autocoups (77%).

Identifying a clear and consistent pattern underpinning autocoups in Africa remains a considerable challenge, reflecting the broader analytical complexity long associated with classical coups. Nevertheless, the literature has proposed several explanatory factors.

First, natural resource wealth has been identified as a key variable. States endowed with oil, diamonds, or other strategic commodities often present incumbents with both greater incentives and enhanced capacities to pursue term extensions and entrench their authority (Posner and Young, n.d.; Cheeseman 2015; Cheeseman and Klaas 2019).

Second, the quality of democracy plays a crucial role. Higher levels of democratic consolidation are strongly associated with greater adherence to constitutional term limits (Reyntjens

2016).

Third, international influence may act as a constraint. External actors—including bilateral donors and international organisations—can exert diplomatic or economic pressure to discourage leaders from circumventing term limits (S. Brown 2001; Tangri and Mwenda 2010).

Finally, opposition strength and ruling party cohesion are critical domestic factors. The effectiveness of opposition forces in coordinating resistance, as well as the incumbent's ability to preserve unity within the ruling party, significantly shapes the political feasibility of tenure extensions (Cheeseman 2019).

Drawing on the Africa Executive Term Limits (AETL) dataset, Cassani (2020) identifies human rights abuses and the desire to evade legal or political accountability as key motivations behind efforts to overstay in power. The more authoritarian a leader's governing style, the more likely they are to challenge constitutional constraints. Moreover, incumbents who can secure the loyalty of the military—often through strategic use of public investment—are significantly more likely to succeed in extending their tenure.

Although both classical coups and autocoups continue to be features of African politics, a marked shift has occurred since the end of the Cold War in 1991. While the incidence of traditional coups has declined, autocoups have become increasingly prevalent. This trend is partly attributable to the widespread adoption of multiparty electoral systems in the 1990s, often accompanied by the formal institutionalisation of presidential term limits (Cassani 2020; Cheeseman 2019).

Prior to 1991, personalist and military regimes predominated across much of the continent, and constitutional term limits were seldom enshrined. The post-Cold War expansion of democratic frameworks contributed to a rise in the adoption of such provisions, and, correspondingly, in attempts to circumvent them. However, it is important to stress that this increase in challenges to term limits should not be interpreted as indicative of declining compliance. On the contrary, overall turnover in executive leadership has increased compared to earlier decades, suggesting that while violations continue to attract attention, adherence to constitutional rules has become

more widespread.

2.5   Summary

This chapter has offered a comprehensive analysis of autocoups, focusing on political episodes in which incumbent leaders extend their tenure beyond constitutionally prescribed limits. By refining existing definitions and distinguishing autocoups from related concepts—such as self-coups, autogolpes, and executive takeovers—the study introduces a novel dataset cataloguing 83 cases of autocoups from 1945 to 2023, of which 64 were successful.

The revised conceptual framework, combined with the newly assembled dataset, enables a more expansive and systematic analysis of irregular leadership transitions. Whereas traditional scholarship has primarily centred on the premature termination of leadership through coups, this study broadens the analytical scope to encompass irregular tenure extensions. This approach yields a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which incumbents may subvert constitutional norms and democratic procedures to consolidate their authority.

Nonetheless, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the proposed definition of an autocoup warrants further scholarly scrutiny and debate before it can achieve broader consensus. Despite rigorous efforts to ensure consistency, certain coding decisions—particularly in ambiguous or borderline cases—may inevitably entail an element of subjective judgement. Second, while this thesis concentrates on tenure extensions, instances involving the expansion of executive power without a formal extension of tenure also deserve deeper conceptual and empirical investigation.

Despite these constraints, the research makes a substantive contribution to the literature on political stability, leadership dynamics, and democratic resilience. The dataset provides a valuable empirical foundation for future inquiries into the mechanisms and motivations underpinning autocoups.

Several promising directions for further research emerge. Subsequent studies could utilise

the dataset to examine the long-term institutional consequences of autocoups, including their role in democratic backsliding, authoritarian entrenchment, and the personalisation of executive power. Additionally, comparative analyses between autocoups and classical coups may illuminate the evolving strategies employed by incumbents to consolidate authority across diverse regime types and political environments.

Chapter 3

Power Dynamics and Autocoup Attempts

Abstract

This chapter explores the determinants of autocoup attempts, aiming to deepen understanding of the political dynamics that underpin tenure extensions by incumbent leaders. Addressing a notable gap in the existing literature, the study contends that the balance of power plays a critical role in shaping the likelihood of autocoup events. In contrast to classical coups—which are often triggered by unstable or fragmented power structures—autocoups tend to arise in contexts characterised by stable and concentrated power.

To operationalise the concept of power balance in an observable manner, regime type is employed as a proxy, reflecting the structural distribution of power between incumbents and potential institutional constraints or elite challengers. Using a bias-reduced logistic regression model, the analysis finds that regime type is a significant predictor of autocoup attempts. Leaders operating within regimes marked by concentrated power are more prone to extend their tenure unconstitutionally. In particular, presidential democracies and personalist autocracies are found to be significantly more susceptible to autocoup attempts than dominant-party regimes.

The study contributes to the broader literature on irregular leadership transitions by offering a more systematic and empirically grounded account of the conditions under which incumbents

seek to subvert constitutional term limits.

3.1 Introduction

As outlined in Chapter 2, scholarly engagement with autocoups has been hampered by conceptual ambiguity and the absence of systematic data, thereby limiting the scope for rigorous empirical investigation. To address this lacuna, the present chapter aims to make a substantive contribution through a quantitative analysis of the determinants of autocoup attempts. Following the methodological precedent established by empirical studies of classical coups—which have primarily examined the antecedents of coup initiation (Gassebner, Gutmann, and Voigt 2016)—this chapter similarly explores why some incumbent leaders attempt to extend their tenure through autocoups, while others do not.

There are three principal reasons for investigating the determinants of autocoups. First, autocoups constitute one of the most prevalent forms of irregular leadership transition, with over 80 documented cases since 1945 (as discussed in Chapter 2). Their frequency has increased notably since 2000, coinciding with a marked global decline in classical coups (Bermeo 2016; Thyne and Powell 2019). Second, autocoups exert profound effects on political stability and democratic development, often resulting in enduring institutional degradation. Third, identifying the drivers of autocoup attempts is essential for future research into their consequences; without a clear understanding of the conditions under which autocoups occur, efforts to prevent them or mitigate their detrimental effects remain constrained.

Although autocoups differ fundamentally from classical coups—particularly in that they are instigated by incumbents rather than external challengers—the two phenomena share key features as disruptions to established political order. Accordingly, methodological tools commonly applied in the study of traditional coups may be fruitfully adapted to analyse autocoups. However, despite the extensive literature on coup dynamics (Gassebner, Gutmann, and Voigt 2016), regime type is frequently treated as a background condition or control variable rather than a central explanatory factor.

This chapter advances the argument that the likelihood of autocoup attempts is shaped sig-

nificantly by the structural distribution of power inherent in regime type. In contrast to classical coups, which often emerge from unstable or contested power structures, autocoups tend to occur in regimes characterised by concentrated and stable authority. Given the challenges of directly measuring internal power configurations, regime type is employed as a proxy variable. The underlying premise is that regime type reflects core institutional arrangements, including the distribution of authority, the robustness of constitutional constraints, and the capacity of incumbents to subvert democratic norms. Analysing cross-regime variation thus facilitates a deeper understanding of the institutional foundations that condition autocoup risk. These power structures tend to be relatively stable over time, as they both shape and are shaped by the regime's overarching institutional design (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014).

To empirically test this proposition, the chapter utilises both a standard logistic regression model and a bias-reduced logistic regression model to assess how regime type influences the likelihood of incumbents extending their tenure through extra-constitutional means.

Given the paucity of quantitative research on autocoups, this study offers a potentially pioneering contribution to the empirical literature by providing a theoretically informed and methodologically rigorous account of their determinants.

The remainder of the chapter is structured as follows. Section 2 examines the dynamics and outcomes of autocoup attempts. Section 3 outlines the research design, including the methodological approach and variables employed. Section 4 presents and interprets the empirical findings, highlighting key patterns and implications. Section 5 concludes by summarising the core insights and reflecting on their broader significance for understanding and mitigating the risks posed by autocoups.

3.2   Dynamics of autocoup attempts

Like traditional coup attempts, autocoups are shaped by two fundamental elements: the disposition of incumbent leaders—referring to their motivations and willingness to act—and their

capability, defined by the resources and opportunities at their disposal. However, autocoups exhibit two notable features that distinguish them from classical coups. First, whereas traditional coups occur predominantly in autocracies (C. L. Thyne and Powell 2014), over one-third of documented autocoups have taken place in democratic regimes, as outlined in Chapter 2. Second, while the success rate of traditional coups hovers around 50%, more than 77% of autocoup attempts have resulted in success, according to the dataset introduced in Chapter 2. These distinctions indicate that the dynamics of disposition and capability underlying autocoups differ significantly from those of traditional coups.

This section explores the complex dynamics of autocoup attempts, with particular emphasis on how the motivations of incumbents, the determinants of success, and the institutional frameworks of various regime types shape the vulnerability of states to such extra-constitutional power extensions.

Motivations for autocoups

Incumbents seeking to prolong their tenure may be driven by a range of motivations, broadly falling into three principal categories: personal ambition, appeals to national interest, and self-preservation.

First, the pursuit of personal power constitutes a compelling incentive for many leaders. The capacity to govern free from institutional constraints enables incumbents to exercise dominance over national policy-making, access state resources, influence the judiciary and legislature, and retain the prestige associated with holding high office. For some, the aspiration to secure a lasting political legacy—to be remembered as a transformative figure—further amplifies the appeal of extended rule.

Second, tenure extensions are often justified by incumbents in the name of the national interest. A commonly advanced rationale suggests that a single term is insufficient for the completion of long-term reforms or development initiatives. Within this narrative, remaining

in power is portrayed as essential to ensuring the continuity and success of ongoing projects. The autocoup is thus framed not as an act of self-interest, but as a necessary step for the greater good.

Third, autocoups may serve as mechanisms of self-preservation. Incumbents facing the prospect of prosecution for corruption, human rights violations, or other transgressions may view continued tenure as a means of preserving legal immunity. Additionally, those who have amassed significant political adversaries during their rule may fear retribution upon leaving office. In such cases, the extension of power is not merely a product of ambition but also a strategy for survival—intended to shield the leader from legal or political repercussions.

Power dynamics and autocoups

While motivations may initiate an incumbent's decision to pursue an autocoup, the decisive factor often lies in their ability to implement and sustain such an action. The relatively high frequency and remarkable success rate of autocoups—over 77, compared to approximately 50% for classical coups—suggest that incumbents benefit from notable structural advantages when attempting to consolidate power. These advantages are not limited to autocracies but are also evident in democratic systems, underscoring the variation in institutional leverage available to incumbents across different regime types.

This reality necessitates a closer examination of state power structures, particularly the allocation of control over the military. The allegiance of the armed forces is a critical determinant of autocoup outcomes. If the military remains loyal to the executive, resistance—whether from civil society, the judiciary, or the legislature—can be suppressed or marginalised. Conversely, open defiance or refusal by the military to support the incumbent may render an autocoup untenable.

Nevertheless, it is reductive to assume that formal authority as commander-in-chief guarantees unqualified control. Just as it is overly simplistic to attribute the success of traditional coups

solely to the presence of military force (Singh 2016), it is equally erroneous to presume that incumbents invariably enjoy the unconditional loyalty of the armed forces. Nominal titles often obscure the complex and sometimes precarious dynamics underpinning military allegiance.

In autocratic regimes, while the military may not be bound by constitutional principles, it is not inherently loyal to the head of state. Executives depend on military officers to execute their commands; however, these officers may harbour independent political ambitions or competing loyalties. A case in point is Uganda in 1971, when President Milton Obote attempted to dismiss General Idi Amin. In response, Amin exploited his influence within the armed forces to mount a successful coup, ousting Obote (Sudduth 2017).

By contrast, in consolidated democracies, military loyalty is typically institutionalised through allegiance to the constitution rather than to individual officeholders. For example, in the United States, following the 2020 presidential election, General Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, publicly reaffirmed the military's constitutional commitment: "We are unique among militaries. We do not take an oath to a king or a queen, a tyrant or a dictator. We do not take an oath to an individual. We take an oath to the Constitution." (US Army Museum, 12 November 2020[1])

In hybrid regimes or fragile democracies, attempts to prolong executive tenure may entail significant political risks. 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).

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[1]CNN. *Top US General Stands Firm Amid Pentagon Turmoil*. 12 November 2020. Available at: https://edition.cnn.com/2020/11/12/politics/mark-milley-pentagon-turmoil/index.html [Accessed 24 April 2025].

Regime types and autocoups

Given the complexities discussed, a more effective analytical strategy entails evaluating the broader balance of power within political systems. As direct observation of this balance is inherently challenging, this study adopts regime type as a proxy—an approach consistent with established methodologies in comparative politics. Regime types encapsulate the institutional architecture of power distribution, particularly with respect to control over the military, political appointments, and policy-making authority.

Following the typology developed by Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2014), autocratic regimes can be categorised as follows:

Military regimes are governed by a junta, typically comprising senior military officers who collectively determine leadership and policy direction. Notable examples include Brazil (1964–1985), Argentina (1976–1983), and El Salvador (1948–1984) (Geddes 1999b).

Personalist regimes revolve around a dominant individual who wields unchecked authority over the military, policy decisions, and succession processes. Prominent instances include Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic (1930–1961), Idi Amin in Uganda (1971–1979), and Jean-Bédel Bokassa in the Central African Republic (1966–1979) (Geddes 1999b).

Dominant-party regimes concentrate authority within a structured political party, with the leader operating either as part of or at the helm of the party apparatus. Illustrative cases include the PRI in Mexico, CCM in Tanzania, and the Leninist parties of Eastern Europe (Geddes 1999b).

Among these regime types, personalist autocracies are particularly conducive to autocoups. The concentration of power in a single individual weakens institutional checks and fosters loyalty—particularly from the military—through mechanisms of personal patronage. While military regimes are rooted in coercive power, they are often beset by internal factionalism, rendering them more susceptible to traditional coups than to autocoups. Dominant-party regimes occupy a more ambiguous position: although party structures can constrain executive action,

exceptionally powerful party leaders may still initiate autocoups, as exemplified by Xi Jinping's constitutional amendments in 2018 within a dominant-party framework.

Monarchies, though technically autocratic, generally render autocoups redundant, as monarchs typically rule for life by constitutional design.

A key clarification is warranted at this juncture: why might leaders in personalist regimes—already possessing extensive authority—feel compelled to extend their tenure further? The answer lies in distinguishing between the scope and duration of power. While such leaders may exercise considerable de facto control over state institutions, many initially assume office via legal or constitutional channels, necessitating a gradual process of consolidation. In this context, autocoups function as formal mechanisms to institutionalise existing dominance—transforming informal power into legally sanctioned permanence. This dynamic is exemplified by the repeated tenure extensions pursued by Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenko.

In post-Soviet Russia, President Boris Yeltsin presided over the transformation of a parliamentary system into a personalist regime. However, Yeltsin himself did not overstay his term; instead, he designated Vladimir Putin as his successor. Upon assuming office in 2000, Putin progressively entrenched his authority, employing constitutional amendments and legal strategies to circumvent term limits and extend his rule indefinitely.

Likewise, in Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko was elected president in 1994 under a party-based system. Within a year, he dismantled the existing institutional framework and established a personalist regime. Since then, he has remained in power through successive tenure extensions, steadily consolidating his control over the state apparatus.

In democratic contexts, autocoups are found exclusively in presidential systems. This reflects the institutional leverage enjoyed by presidents, who are directly elected, typically command the armed forces, and may possess the capacity to override or circumvent legislative opposition. By contrast, prime ministers in parliamentary systems are considerably more constrained. Their tenure depends on maintaining legislative confidence and they may be removed through votes of no confidence. Moreover, they often lack direct control over the military,

which is institutionally separated from their office. As a result, prime ministers are subject to more frequent leadership turnover and face fewer opportunities to unilaterally extend their mandates. For instance, the United Kingdom saw three prime ministers serve in 2022 alone, while Japan has had 36 prime ministers since 1945—an average of one every two years. In contrast, only 14 presidents have served in the United States over the same period, reflecting greater institutional continuity. These structural distinctions render presidential systems more conducive to autocoups—even within well-established democracies—due to their centralised executive authority and command over the military.

From this analysis, the following hypothesis is proposed:

The likelihood of autocoup attempts is significantly shaped by regime type, with regimes characterised by concentrated and stable executive power—namely, personalist autocracies and presidential democracies—being the most susceptible, relative to other regime types.

H3-1: The likelihood of autocoup attempts is significantly shaped by regime type, with regimes characterised by concentrated and stable executive power—namely, personalist autocracies and presidential democracies—being the most susceptible, relative to other regime types.

3.3   Research design

Methodology

Given the binary nature of the dependent variable—namely, whether an autocoup is attempted in a given country-year—the study initially employs a logistic regression model to investigate the determinants of autocoup attempts. This method enables the identification of statistically significant factors influencing the likelihood of such events, as well as the direction and magnitude of their effects.

Nevertheless, the rarity of autocoup incidents—83 cases out of over 9,000 observations—

poses a methodological challenge. Standard maximum likelihood estimation techniques, including conventional logit and probit models, are prone to underestimating the probability of rare events. To mitigate this limitation and improve the robustness of statistical inference, the analysis also employs Firth's Bias-Reduced Penalised Maximum Likelihood Estimation (commonly referred to as Bias-Reduced Logit), as outlined by FIRTH (1993).

Data and variables

The primary dataset, which incorporates information on autocoups and regime types, spans the period from 1945 to 2023. However, due to data alignment limitations, the usable data range extends from 1945 to 2018. The dataset comprises approximately 9,400 country-year observations, of which 83 represent recorded autocoup attempts.

Dependent variable

The analysis draws upon the autocoup dataset introduced in Chapter 2, which covers the period from 1945 to 2023 and includes 83 documented autocoup attempts. Summary statistics for these events, as well as the corresponding regime classifications, are presented in Chapter 2.

Autocoup attempt: A binary variable indicating whether an autocoup attempt occurred (coded as 1) or did not occur (coded as 0) in each country-year observation.

Independent variables

The principal independent variable in this analysis is regime type, reflecting the central analytical focus of the study. Regime classifications are drawn from the typology developed by Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2014) (GWF dataset), which distinguishes among military, personalist, and dominant-party regimes within autocratic systems. For democratic systems, regimes are categorised as either parliamentary or presidential. A residual category—labelled "other"— captures regimes that are provisional, transitional, or otherwise not easily classified within the

primary typology.

In addition to regime type, a range of control variables is included, selected on the basis of established scholarship on the determinants of coups. These controls account for factors such as economic performance, political violence, and the tenure of incumbents. Further controls comprise the level of democracy, population size, and a Cold War dummy variable, which captures temporal variation in the global political environment.

Economic Level: Measured by GDP per capita, this variable reflects the overall economic wellbeing of a country. Data are sourced from the V-Dem dataset (Fariss et al. 2022) and are expressed in constant 2017 international dollars (PPP, per thousand).

Economic Performance: Operationalised via the Current-Trend (CT) ratio developed by Krishnarajan (2019), this measure compares current GDP per capita with the average of the previous five years. Higher CT values indicate stronger economic growth. Formally:

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

Political violence: Measured using a violence index based on the "actotal" variable from the Major Episodes of Political Violence dataset (Monty G. Marshall 2005), this index captures both internal and interstate conflict. Scores range from 0 (complete stability) to 18 (maximum instability).

Days in office (log): The natural logarithm of an incumbent leader's cumulative days in office is included as a proxy for power consolidation. Longer tenures are hypothesised to facilitate the conditions necessary for an autocoup. Data are drawn from the Archigos dataset (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009) and the Political Leaders' Affiliation Database (PLAD) (Bomprezzi et al. 2024).

Democratic level: This variable employs the Polity V score to measure the degree of democracy in a country, ranging from -10 (fully autocratic) to +10 (fully democratic). The index, developed by the Centre for Systemic Peace, assesses regime characteristics such as the

competitiveness of political participation, executive recruitment, and constraints on executive authority (Monty G. Marshall, n.d.).

Population size: The natural logarithm of a country's population is included to account for the potential effects of demographic scale on governance. Larger populations may present more complex administrative challenges and generate greater opposition. Data are sourced from the V-Dem dataset.

Cold War: Following the precedent of earlier studies (C. L. Thyne and Powell 2014; Derpanopoulos et al. 2016; Dahl and Gleditsch 2023b), a dummy variable is included to distinguish the Cold War period (approximately 1960–1990) from the post-Cold War era. This distinction reflects the relative paucity of autocoup events during the Cold War and their increased frequency thereafter.

3.4 Results and discussions

This analysis employs a logistic regression framework to investigate the factors influencing the likelihood of autocoup attempts. Given the binary nature of the dependent variable—namely, whether an autocoup attempt occurred in a given country-year—and the relative infrequency of such events in certain categories, a bias-reduced logit model is used alongside the standard logit model. The bias-reduced approach is particularly appropriate for rare event data, as it mitigates estimation bias associated with standard maximum likelihood techniques. Accordingly, the discussion that follows focuses primarily on the results derived from the bias-reduced logit model. These results are presented in the form of Odds Ratios (ORs), which provide a more intuitive understanding of the relationships between explanatory variables and the probability of autocoup attempts than log-odds coefficients.

The estimates obtained from the bias-reduced logit model are summarised in Table 3.1. The central hypothesis advanced in this study posits that the likelihood of autocoup attempts is significantly shaped by regime type, with personalist autocracies and presidential democracies

Table 3.1: Determinants of autocoup attempts(1945-2018)

Characteristic	N	Event N	Standard Logit log(OR)[1]	OR[1]	SE	Bias-reduced Logit log(OR)[1]	OR[1]	SE
Constant	9,434	78	-4.7**	0.01**	0.02	-4.6***	0.01***	1.77
Regime Type								
Dominant Party	2,312	19	—	—	—	—	—	—
Personal	1,308	26	0.74**	2.10**	0.65	0.73**	2.08**	0.30
Presidential Democracy	1,642	27	1.6***	5.01***	2.42	1.6***	4.87***	0.47
Military	630	2	-0.80	0.45	0.34	-0.62	0.54	0.67
Parliamentary Democracy	2,368	1	-1.7	0.18	0.20	-1.4	0.26	0.92
Other	1,174	3	-1.2*	0.30*	0.19	-1.1*	0.34*	0.58
GDP per capita	9,434	78	-0.01	0.99	0.01	-0.01	0.99	0.01
GDP growth trend	9,434	78	0.91	2.49	3.47	0.97	2.64	1.33
Political violence	9,434	78	0.01	1.01	0.07	0.03	1.03	0.06
Log of Population	9,434	78	-0.14	0.87	0.08	-0.15*	0.86*	0.09
Polity V scores	9,434	78	-0.09***	0.91***	0.03	-0.09***	0.91***	0.03
Log of days in office	9,434	78	0.01	1.01	0.13	0.00	1.00	0.12
Cold war			-0.80***	0.45***	0.12	-0.79***	0.45***	0.26

[1]*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Abbreviations: CI = Confidence Interval, OR = Odds Ratio, SE = Standard Error

being particularly prone to such events in comparison with other regime types. The model adopts "dominant-party" regimes as the reference category for comparison.

The findings offer strong empirical support for this hypothesis. Relative to dominant-party regimes, personalist autocracies exhibit an estimated odds ratio of 2.08, which is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). This suggests that the odds of an autocoup attempt are just over twice as high in personalist autocracies, holding all other variables constant. Presidential democracies demonstrate an even greater propensity for autocoup attempts, with an estimated odds ratio of 4.87 ($p < 0.01$), indicating that the odds are nearly 3.8 times higher than in dominant-party regimes, ceteris paribus. By contrast, military regimes, parliamentary democracies, and regimes classified as "other" all exhibit lower odds of experiencing an autocoup relative to dominant-party regimes. Among these, only the "other" category reaches marginal statistical significance.

These results provide compelling evidence that both personalist autocracies and presidential democracies are significantly more susceptible to autocoup attempts than dominant-party

regimes. The magnitude of the odds ratios for personalist autocracies (2.08) and presidential democracies (4.87) is substantially greater than those for other regime types, thereby lending robust support to the central hypothesis.

With respect to the control variables, several demonstrate statistically significant relationships with the likelihood of autocoup attempts. The logged Polity V score—reflecting the level of democratic institutionalisation—is negatively associated with the probability of an autocoup ($OR = 0.91$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that higher levels of democracy reduce the risk of such occurrences. Similarly, the Cold War dummy variable is associated with a significantly reduced likelihood of autocoup attempts ($OR 50.46$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that these events were comparatively rarer during the Cold War period. The natural logarithm of population size is marginally significant and exhibits a negative association with autocoup likelihood, potentially reflecting the greater organisational complexity and political constraints faced in more populous states.

By contrast, several variables—including GDP per capita, economic performance (as measured by the GDP growth trend ratio), political violence, and the logged number of days the incumbent has been in office—do not exhibit statistically significant associations with the likelihood of autocoup attempts in this model.

In sum, the bias-reduced logit model confirms that regime type is a critical determinant of autocoup propensity. In line with the theoretical expectations, personalist autocracies and presidential democracies are significantly more vulnerable to autocoup attempts than dominant-party regimes or other regime types. These findings underscore the institutional fragility inherent in such systems, particularly in contexts where executive authority is highly centralised. The analysis also highlights the relevance of broader political and historical factors, including democratic development and the Cold War period, in shaping the incidence of autocoup events.

3.5 Summary

This chapter offers a quantitative examination of the determinants of autocoup attempts, addressing a well-documented lacuna in the existing literature, which has often been impeded by conceptual ambiguity and a lack of systematic empirical data. The study advances the argument that the likelihood of autocoup attempts is significantly influenced by the structural distribution of power within political regimes, operationalised through regime type. Drawing on both standard logistic regression and Firth's bias-reduced logit model, the analysis demonstrates that personalist autocracies and presidential democracies are substantially more prone to autocoup attempts than dominant-party regimes. Specifically, the odds of an autocoup are estimated to be approximately three times higher in personalist autocracies and four times higher in presidential democracies, relative to the reference category.

These findings offer empirical support for the hypothesis that such regime types possess structural vulnerabilities that render them particularly susceptible to extra-constitutional power consolidation by incumbents. In addition to regime type, the study identifies further significant covariates: population size, the degree of democratisation, and the broader historical context of the Cold War period all exert measurable influence on the probability of autocoup occurrence. By analysing the strategic incentives faced by incumbent leaders across different institutional configurations, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of irregular leader transitions.

Nonetheless, the analysis also highlights conceptual and methodological complexities that merit further scholarly attention. Unlike traditional coups—which may occur at any point during a regime's lifespan and can potentially recur within short intervals—autocoups appear to follow distinct temporal logics. For example, the likelihood of an autocoup may be lower during the early stages of a leader's tenure and increase as the end of a constitutional term approaches. Moreover, while successful tenure extensions may reduce the short-term likelihood of further attempts, instances of repeated extensions—such as those undertaken by Presidents Putin and

Lukashenko—indicate that some incumbents may engage in multiple autocoups over time.

To render the analysis tractable, this study adopts the simplifying assumption that an autocoup attempt occurs only once per leadership tenure. While analytically necessary, this assumption underscores the need for future research to investigate the temporal dynamics and sequencing of autocoup behaviour. Such inquiries would usefully complement the present study by offering deeper insight into the longitudinal patterns and institutional adaptations that shape authoritarian resilience and democratic backsliding.

Chapter 4

Power Acquisition and Leadership Survival: A Comparative Analysis of Coup-installed and Autocoup Leaders

Abstract

This chapter investigates the impact of power acquisition methods on the tenure of political leaders who assume office through irregular means, with a particular focus on individuals installed via coups and those who subsequently extend their rule through autocoups. It posits that leaders who consolidate their authority through autocoups are likely to enjoy greater longevity in office than those installed by coups alone. However, this hypothesis is not supported by the empirical evidence. A time-dependent Cox proportional hazards model indicates no statistically significant difference in the risk of removal between coup-installed and autocoup leaders once key covariates—especially regime type—are taken into account.

Rather, the analysis underscores the critical role of regime characteristics in shaping leadership survival. Leaders operating within military or transitional regimes are found to face significantly higher hazards of removal compared to their counterparts in dominant-party sys-

tems. Furthermore, higher levels of GDP per capita are associated with increased leadership stability, while greater levels of political violence correspond with elevated risks of ousting.

These findings suggest that structural and institutional contexts exert a stronger influence on the durability of irregular leadership than the specific mechanism through which power is initially acquired. This study contributes to the literature on political survival by highlighting the significance of regime type and broader political conditions in accounting for leadership longevity following non-conventional ascensions to power.

4.1 Introduction

The enduring question of why some political leaders remain in power for decades while others are deposed within months or even days has long captivated scholars in political science. Despite the considerable body of research on leadership longevity, a particular subset of leaders—those who assume power through coups or consolidate it via autocoups—has received comparatively limited scholarly attention. Investigating the tenures of these leaders is essential, as it illuminates the dynamics underpinning irregular transitions of power and their broader implications for political stability and democratic governance.

Leaders who rise through irregular means, such as coups and autocoups, differ markedly from those who attain office via institutionalised, constitutional processes. These irregular leaders often pose more complex analytical challenges, given the uncertainties surrounding their authority and legitimacy. Data from the Archigos dataset underscores the prevalence of such irregular transitions: between 1945 and 2015, more than half of the leaders who entered power irregularly also exited through irregular means—a rate considerably higher than that observed for leaders who entered office through regular procedures (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009).

Coup-installed and autocoup leaders comprise a significant proportion of these irregular cases. According to Archigos, 246 of the 374 leaders (65.8%) who exited power irregularly were removed via coups (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009). Additionally, research by Frantz and Stein (2016) shows that coups constitute approximately one-third of all exits in autocracies, representing the most common form of leadership transition in such regimes. Complementing this, the autocoup dataset introduced in Chapter 2 documents 83 autocoup attempts between 1945 and 2023, of which 64 were successful.

Assessing the tenure of leaders who assume office through coups or autocoups presents methodological challenges, due to the inherent volatility and uncertainty associated with such irregular modes of accession. Nonetheless, comparative evidence—excluding short-lived lead-

ers who remained in office for fewer than 180 days—suggests that those who extend their rule through autocoups tend to experience longer average post-autocoup tenures (approximately 9.8 years) than those who initially assume power via coups (approximately 6.8 years), indicating a potential tenure gap of around 3 years.
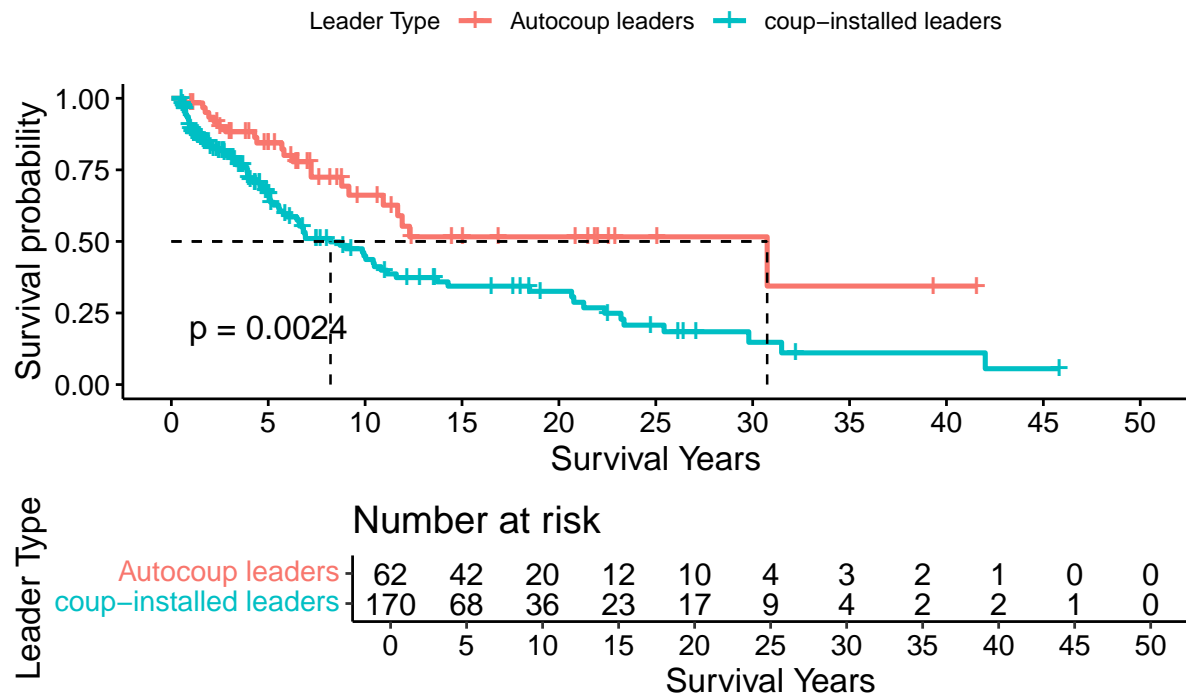
Figure 4.1: Survival curves of autocoup and coup-installed leaders

Preliminary survival analysis, using a log-rank test illustrated in Figure 4.1, reveals a statistically significant difference in tenure length between these two groups. The survival curve for autocoup leaders consistently lies above that of coup-installed leaders, suggesting both a lower hazard of removal and longer durations in office for the former.

This study posits that the method of power acquisition exerts a significant influence on leadership survival. Coup-installed leaders may encounter greater resistance or institutional fragility, contributing to shorter average tenures than those who consolidate power through autocoups. Employing Cox proportional hazards and time-dependent Cox models, the analysis supports this hypothesis by demonstrating that autocoup leaders tend to remain in office longer

than their coup-installed counterparts.

This research makes two key contributions to the literature on political survival. First, it introduces an under-explored explanatory factor: the method of accession to power. Second, by applying survival models, this study provides robust empirical evidence of the significant disparity in tenure length between autocoup and coup-installed leaders. These insights may help account for the rising incidence of autocoup-driven tenure extensions since 2000, as incumbents increasingly observe and emulate successful precedents.

The remainder of this chapter is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the existing literature on political survival, establishing the theoretical context for the analysis. Section 3 examines the factors influencing the longevity of coup-installed and autocoup leaders. Section 4 details the methodological approach and data sources, including the application of survival analysis techniques. Section 5 presents the empirical findings and interprets their implications. Finally, Section 6 offers concluding reflections and considers the broader consequences of the findings for political stability and democratic development.

4.2   Literature review

The longevity of political leaders, which varies markedly across regimes, countries, and historical periods, has long been a focal point of inquiry within political science. Research in this field is generally categorised into two interrelated strands: regime survival and individual leader survival. While the former concerns the endurance of political systems—such as monarchies, dominant parties, or ideological frameworks—the latter focuses on the duration of individual leaders' tenure in office.

Patterns of political survival differ significantly across regime types. For instance, parliamentary democracies (e.g., Japan and the United Kingdom) often witness sustained party dominance alongside frequent leadership turnover. Similarly, communist regimes (e.g., China) are typically characterised by stable party control but relatively frequent changes in leadership.

In contrast, presidential systems (e.g., the United States) and many military regimes tend to exhibit more frequent changes in both leadership and ruling entity.

The existing literature on leader survival is both extensive and diverse. Some studies investigate mechanisms that influence leadership durability within specific regime types, such as democracies (Svolik 2014) or autocracies (Davenport, RezaeeDaryakenari, and Wood 2021). Others attempt to formulate more general theoretical frameworks applicable across various political systems (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003). Despite these efforts, the ambition of constructing a universal theory of leadership survival remains elusive due to the inherent complexities across regime contexts.

Mechanisms of leadership transition vary substantially between democracies and autocracies. In autocratic regimes, leadership selection processes are often closed, with access restricted to a limited elite. Even when elections are held, meaningful competition is frequently constrained by structural or legal barriers. The opacity of leadership transitions in autocracies complicates assessments of popular support and renders concepts such as selectorates or winning coalitions, as theorised by Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003), difficult to operationalise.

Given these challenges, focusing research on specific categories of leaders may yield more analytically fruitful outcomes. The study of irregular leaders—those who ascend to power via coups or extend their rule through autocoups—offers a compelling line of inquiry due to the distinctive uncertainty and volatility that characterise their tenures.

Two dominant perspectives have emerged in the literature to explain leader survival. The first emphasises objective structural factors and material resources, such as individual competence (Yu and Jong-A-Pin 2016), societal stability (Arriola 2009), economic development (Palmer and Whitten 1999; Williams 2011), natural resource wealth (Smith 2004; Quiroz Flores and Smith 2012; Wright, Frantz, and Geddes 2013), and external support (Licht 2009; Wright 2008; C. Thyne et al. 2017). The second perspective focuses on subjective dimensions and strategic choices, including policy decisions, management of opposition, and mechanisms for consolidating authority (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Morrison 2009; Escribà-Folch 2013;

Davenport, RezaeeDaryakenari, and Wood 2021).

Coups, a critical form of irregular leadership transition, have garnered substantial scholarly attention. Research has examined strategies for coup prevention (J. Powell 2017; Sudduth 2017; De Bruin 2020), as well as the effects of coups on leadership trajectories and the subsequent behaviour of coup leaders (Sudduth 2017; Sudduth and Bell 2018; Easton and Siverson 2018).

Despite this body of work, a significant lacuna remains in the comparative analysis of leadership survival between coup-installed and autocoup leaders. This study seeks to address this gap by examining and comparing the tenure lengths of leaders emerging from these two distinct forms of irregular power acquisition.

By centring its analysis on the survival of coup-installed versus autocoup leaders, this research aims to enhance our understanding of political longevity in the context of irregular leadership transitions. Such a focus promises to yield important insights into the strategic and structural conditions that underpin leadership durability in diverse political environments.

4.3 Survival dynamics of autocoup and coup-installed leaders

The study of leadership survival within political systems poses significant methodological and conceptual challenges, owing to the opaque and complex nature of power transitions. These very challenges, however, underscore the importance of such inquiry, as it illuminates the often-neglected dynamics of political leadership. While the survival trajectories of individual leaders vary considerably, discernible patterns can be identified. Leaders emerging from similar origins or operating within comparable regime types frequently display analogous characteristics, thereby enabling systematic and meaningful comparative analysis.

Key definitions and scope

Prior to undertaking a comparative analysis, it is essential to establish clear definitions of key terms to ensure conceptual clarity and analytical coherence. The definitions employed in this chapter align with those presented in Chapter 2.

Autocoup leaders are defined as incumbent rulers who utilise extra-constitutional measures to prolong their tenure in office. In contrast, coup-installed leaders are those who ascend to power following a successful coup, irrespective of whether they personally orchestrated or participated in the coup. This inclusive definition encompasses both coup perpetrators and individuals subsequently appointed to lead, thereby offering a comprehensive perspective on leadership following violent or forceful regime change.

Three clarifications are warranted in delineating the analytical scope. First is about the minimum tenure threshold. To facilitate a meaningful and robust analysis, the study imposes a minimum threshold of six months in office for both autocoup and coup-installed leaders. This criterion serves to exclude brief or interim leadership episodes that are less analytically relevant to the study of survival dynamics, thereby enhancing the reliability of the findings.

Second is the potential overlap in leadership categories. Some cases may present ambiguities due to overlapping leadership pathways. A notable example is Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who assumed the presidency of Tunisia in 1987 following a bloodless coup that removed President Habib Bourguiba on grounds of ill health. In 2002, Ben Ali further consolidated power through a constitutional referendum that removed term limits and raised the presidential age cap from 70 to 75 years (Bonci and Cavatorta 2019). This latter manoeuvre could be construed as an autocoup. Nevertheless, since Ben Ali initially came to power via the 1987 coup and remained in office continuously, he is classified in this study as a coup-installed leader. To preserve analytical consistency and prevent category overlap, this study adopts the rule that any leader who initially acquires office through a coup is categorised as coup-installed, even if they later consolidate or extend their rule through elections or extra-constitutional means.

Third is the focus on post-event tenure. The analysis compares the post-autocoup tenure of autocoup leaders with the post-coup tenure of coup-installed leaders. Any period served by autocoup leaders prior to the tenure-extending manoeuvre is excluded. This approach ensures a like-for-like comparison by focusing on the period of leadership characterised by irregular legitimacy and heightened political uncertainty. Both categories of leaders share key characteristics—such as limited institutional legitimacy, increased exposure to instability, and dependence on coercive or extra-legal mechanisms—which render the comparison analytically fruitful.

Challenges in power consolidation

Both autocoup and coup-installed leaders encounter distinct challenges in consolidating power, largely arising from the differing intensity of issues related to illegitimacy, uncertainty, and instability. These disparities create an uneven political landscape, placing coup-installed leaders at a marked disadvantage. Table 4.1 presents a comparative overview of the principal characteristics of autocoup and coup-installed leaders, highlighting these critical differences.

Table 4.1: Main features of autocoup and coup-installed leaders

Feature	Autocoup Leader	Coup Entry Leader
Illegitimacy	Normally attained through lawful procedures, but lacking consensus legitimacy	Blatantly illegal
Uncertainty	Initially with some certainty, but decreases as the leader's age grows or health worsens	Significant uncertainty initially
Instability	Relatively stable	Unstable except when a strongman emerges or constitutional institutions are established
Balance of Power	Generally in a better position of power	Initially unclear and challenging to establish a balance

Illegitimacy

Although both categories of leaders face legitimacy deficits, the nature and perception of this deficit vary considerably.

For coup-installed leaders, illegitimacy is overt and unequivocal, stemming from the direct—often violent—seizure of power. Such abrupt disruptions to established political norms and institutions elicit immediate condemnation, both domestically and internationally, and cast doubt on the regime's authority from the outset.

By contrast, autocoup leaders adopt a more covert and strategic approach, utilising legal and institutional mechanisms to lend a veneer of democratic legitimacy. Though often superficial, this legalistic veneer can obscure the authoritarian nature of their actions, offering a temporary shield from domestic opposition and international scrutiny while they seek to consolidate power.

Uncertainty

The irregular accession of both types of leaders generates uncertainty regarding the durability of their rule and the modalities of succession. However, the nature and sources of this uncertainty differ markedly.

Coup-installed leaders confront a triad of uncertainties. First, the immediate post-coup environment frequently involves intense power struggles within the military or ruling coalition, creating ambiguity over who will ultimately prevail. Second, their tenure is intrinsically unstable, threatened by internal rivalries, popular mobilisation, or the prospect of counter-coups. Third, the absence of institutionalised succession mechanisms exacerbates this unpredictability, heightening the risk of future instability.

Autocoup leaders, while not entirely insulated from uncertainty, typically face fewer ambiguities. As incumbents, they retain formal authority post-autocoup, thereby eliminating immediate succession questions. Moreover, autocoup leaders often articulate explicit ambitions to prolong their rule indefinitely, or through gradual extensions, cultivating an image of conti-

nuity. This perceived stability—whether genuine or contrived—may foster a more predictable political climate in the short term.

Instability

The combination of legitimacy deficits and enduring uncertainty inevitably fosters insecurity and a sense of political fragility. Consequently, both autocoup and coup-installed leaders prioritise strategies to stabilise their regimes. However, the scale and nature of these challenges differ.

Coup-installed leaders typically face the formidable task of reconfiguring political power from the ground up. This often involves purging opponents, suppressing dissent, and restructuring institutional frameworks. Such aggressive measures can provoke significant resistance, alienate potential allies, and incite societal unrest. Moreover, the imperative to appease powerful domestic and international actors may force these leaders into precarious compromises that further undermine their authority.

In contrast, autocoup leaders often benefit from a degree of institutional continuity and regime loyalty. This relative stability enables them to pursue consolidation incrementally, reducing the likelihood of immediate backlash. While opposition may persist, autocoup leaders are generally less exposed to existential threats in the early stages of their extended rule, affording them greater latitude to entrench their authority.

Understanding these contrasting challenges allows for a more refined appreciation of the strategic environments in which irregular leaders operate. This comparative lens provides a valuable framework for analysing the divergent pathways to power consolidation, and the varied tools and tactics employed by autocoup and coup-installed leaders in navigating the precarious terrain of non-traditional political ascension.

Empirical evidence and hypothesis

Empirical evidence underscores the relative disadvantage faced by coup-installed leaders, revealing a complex interplay between historical patterns, difficulties in consolidating power, and variations in leadership longevity. This section presents key empirical findings and introduces the central hypothesis that guides this study.

Data analysis indicates a strong correlation between the frequency of coup attempts within a given country and the likelihood of future coups. Notably, more than one-third of all coups since 1950 have taken place in the ten countries with the highest number of coup attempts (Powell and Thyne 2011). This suggests a self-reinforcing cycle of political instability, in which each successful coup increases the probability of further attempts, thereby cultivating an environment of persistent uncertainty for coup-installed leaders.

The disparity in leadership duration between autocoup and coup-installed leaders is clearly reflected in survival data. As illustrated in Figure 4.1, leaders who extend their tenure through autocoups remain in office, on average, approximately five years longer than those who assume power via coups. This marked difference in tenure highlights the distinct challenges these two categories of leaders encounter in retaining power.

The divergent consolidation environments faced by autocoup and coup-installed leaders contribute to a self-perpetuating cycle with significant implications for tenure length. Coup-installed leaders confront acute legitimacy deficits and heightened internal instability; they often struggle to attract and retain durable support, rendering them more susceptible to both internal dissent and external pressures. Their comparatively shorter average tenures reinforce perceptions of volatility and fragility. Autocoup leaders, by contrast, frequently benefit from a superficial veneer of legality and enjoy a more favourable starting position as incumbents. This allows them to consolidate authority more effectively, cultivate elite and public support, and reduce the immediate risk of displacement. Their longer tenures further contribute to perceptions of regime stability. This cyclical dynamic suggests that the initial method of acquiring or

extending power has long-term implications for a leader's capacity to maintain their position.

Drawing upon these empirical observations and the theoretical framework outlined in preceding sections, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4-1: Political leaders who successfully extend their tenure through autocoups are more likely to enjoy longer extended tenures than those who assume office through coups.

This hypothesis encapsulates the anticipated effects of the differing challenges and advantages faced by coup-installed and autocoup leaders. By empirically testing this claim, the study seeks to assess the impact of irregular accession mechanisms on leadership survival, thereby advancing a more nuanced understanding of political durability in contexts of non-traditional transitions to power.

4.4   Research design

This section outlines the methodological framework employed to test the hypothesis that autocoup leaders exhibit longer survival times in office than coup-installed leaders. Survival analysis is utilised to model leadership tenure, with Cox proportional hazards models employed to estimate the effects of leader type while controlling for relevant covariates.

Methodology: Survival analysis

Two variants of the Cox model are employed to analyse the survival durations of coup-installed and autocoup leaders.

Cox proportional hazards (PH) model: This model incorporates only time-invariant covariates measured at the time of the leader's entry into office. It assumes that the effects of these covariates on the hazard rate remain constant over time.

Time-dependent Cox model: This model allows for the inclusion of covariates whose values may vary over time, such as indicators of economic performance and levels of political

violence. By incorporating temporal variation, this model offers a more dynamic and nuanced analysis of leadership survival.

The Cox model is preferred over the Kaplan-Meier estimator due to its capacity to account for multiple explanatory variables simultaneously. Although the Cox model does not directly estimate the expected duration of tenure, it estimates the hazard ratio, which reflects the relative risk of being removed from office. A higher cumulative hazard corresponds to a lower probability of survival, thereby capturing critical dynamics of leadership vulnerability over time.

Data and variables

The analysis relies on a set of dependent and independent variables, complemented by a range of controls.

Survival Time: Measured in days, this variable captures the length of a leader's tenure. For coup-installed leaders, the tenure is measured from the date of their accession via coup. For autocoup leaders, it begins on the date their original legitimate term would have expired. For instance, Vladimir Putin assumed the presidency of Russia in 2000, stepped down in 2008 after completing two terms, and assumed the post of prime minister while continuing to exert de facto control. His post-autocoup tenure, therefore, is coded as beginning in 2008.

End Point Status: This categorical variable indicates how a leader's tenure ended:

- **0 = Censored:** Denotes leaders who exited office through regular or voluntary means, such as electoral defeat, term expiration, voluntary resignation due to health, or natural death.

- **1 = Ousted:** Denotes leaders who were forcibly removed, including through coups, resignations under pressure, or assassination.

The key independent variable is the leader type, which categorizes leaders into two distinct groups:

- **Group A = Autocoup leader**: An incumbent who extends their tenure through extra-constitutional means.
- **Group B = Coup-installed leader**: A leader who assumes power through a coup, whether or not they personally participated in its execution.

This variable serves as the primary explanatory factor, enabling a direct comparison of survival outcomes between the two categories of irregular leaders.

Data for the dependent and independent variables are drawn from the newly constructed autocoup dataset introduced in this study, as well as the Archigos dataset (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009)and the Political Leaders and Alliances Dataset (PLAD) (Bomprezzi et al. 2024).

To isolate the effect of leader type on survival, the analysis incorporates a set of control variables, as identified in the autocoup analysis presented in Chapter 3. These include: regime type which is categorised as democracy, hybrid regime, or autocracy, to account for institutional differences that may influence leadership stability; economic performance, measured through macroeconomic indicators such as GDP growth, which may affect a leader's ability to retain support; political violence, captures the extent of civil conflict, repression, or unrest, which can threaten regime stability and leadership tenure; population size, controls for structural differences across states that may impact political dynamics; Polity V scores, reflects the institutional characteristics and degree of democracy or autocracy within a regime.

These control variables enhance the comparability and robustness of the statistical models, ensuring that the estimated effects of leader type are not confounded by broader political, economic, or demographic conditions.

Table 4.2: Cox models for survival time of different types of leaders

Characteristic	Cox PH Model				Time-dependent Cox Model			
	N	Event N	HR[1]	SE	N	Event N	HR[1]	SE
Leader Type								
Autocoup leaders	61	21	1.00	—	559	21	1.00	—
Coup-installed leaders	167	84	1.76**	0.274	1,171	80	1.31	0.275
Regime Types								
dominant-party	48	20	1.00	—	395	13	1.00	—
military	38	19	2.26**	0.351	356	36	2.06**	0.356
personal	64	30	1.67*	0.296	749	43	1.55	0.327
presidential	36	13	1.55	0.396	98	3	1.40	0.713
parliamentary	18	9	2.00	0.448	27	1	1.91	1.07
other	24	14	1.86*	0.374	105	5	2.59**	0.557
GDP Growth Trend	228	105	0.91	1.86	1,730	101	0.07*	1.72
GDP per capita	228	105	0.98	0.010	1,730	101	0.98***	0.010
Population: log	228	105	1.00	0.079	1,730	101	0.92	0.080
Polity V score	228	105	1.00	0.031	1,730	101	1.01	0.027
Political violence	228	105	0.95	0.051	1,730	101	1.09**	0.046

[1]*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Abbreviations: HR = Hazard Ratio, SE = Standard Error

4.5   Results and discussion

Model results

Regression results for both the Cox Proportional Hazards (PH) model and the time-dependent Cox model, estimated using the survival package in R (Therneau 2024), are presented in Table 4.2.

The two models yield divergent findings concerning the central question of this study. The Cox PH model reveals a statistically significant relationship between leadership type and the hazard of removal from office ($p < 0.05$). Specifically, this model supports the hypothesis that leaders installed through coups face a 1.76 times hazard of removal compared to those who came to power via autocoups. However, the time-dependent Cox model, which incorporates time-varying covariates such as economic performance and political violence, does not find

a statistically significant relationship between leadership type and survival in office. Given the greater robustness of the time-dependent specification, the interpretation of the principal findings is grounded in this model.

According to the time-dependent Cox model, and contrary to the initial hypothesis and preliminary results, the mode of accession to power does not significantly influence the tenure of irregularly inaugurated political leaders once relevant covariates—particularly regime type—are controlled for. Nevertheless, these results reinforce the broader conclusion of Chapter 3: that the balance of power, fundamentally shaped by regime characteristics, is central to both the seizure and retention of political authority.

In particular, regime type emerges as a statistically significant determinant of political survival. Leaders in military regimes exhibit a hazard ratio of 2.06 relative to their counterparts in dominant-party regimes, suggesting that military leaders are significantly more likely to be ousted. This implies that, all else being equal, a military leader faces a 106% greater risk of removal at any given point compared to a leader within a dominant-party regime. Leaders operating within regimes classified as "Other"—typically encompassing transitional or provisional arrangements—display an even higher hazard ratio of 2.59, consistent with the inherent volatility of such political configurations.

Economic development, proxied by GDP per capita, also exerts a statistically significant influence. A hazard ratio of 0.98 indicates that each additional $10,000 in GDP per capita is associated with a 2% reduction in the risk of removal, ceteris paribus. Conversely, GDP growth trend only shows a marginal statistically significant influence ($p < 0.1$). Political violence, measured via the violence index, demonstrates a positive relationship with leader removal: a one-unit increase in the index raises the hazard of removal by approximately 9%.

Other control variables—including the logarithm of population size and Polity V scores—do not reach statistical significance in the time-dependent Cox model. Although these factors are theoretically salient and frequently employed in studies of political survival, their lack of significance in this context suggests that, under conditions of irregular leadership transitions,

more immediate variables such as regime type and political violence may play a more decisive role. It is plausible that the effects of structural economic growth, demographic scale, and institutional quality are either mediated through more proximate mechanisms or unfold over longer time horizons, rendering them less visible in short- to medium-term analyses of leader tenure.

It is important to note that the results are contingent upon the exclusion of very short-lived leaders—those who remained in office for fewer than 180 days following a coup or autocoup. A significant number of coup-installed leaders survive only for brief periods—often mere days or months—a phenomenon that is comparatively rare among autocoup leaders. Consequently, the exclusion criterion introduces a slight bias in favour of coup-installed leaders. Nevertheless, this study contends that the inclusion of such short-lived tenures would be methodologically inappropriate. Although these leaders technically meet the minimal threshold for a successful coup (i.e., retaining power for more than seven days), their failure to consolidate authority suggests they did not truly succeed in establishing post-coup rule in a meaningful or sustained manner.

Discussion

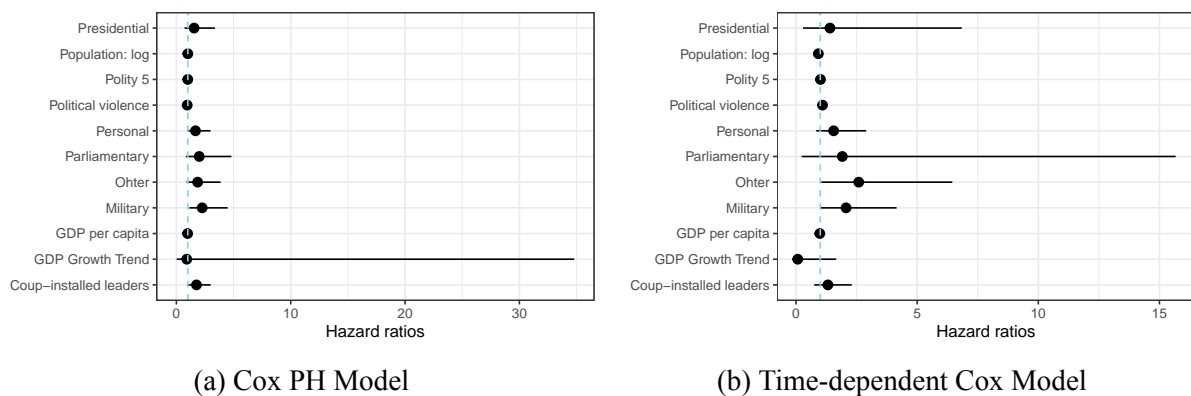(a) Cox PH Model   (b) Time-dependent Cox Model

Figure 4.2: Hazard ratios and 95% CIs for Leader Ousting

Figure 4.2 illustrates the hazard ratios and their associated 95% confidence intervals for the

variables included in the Cox proportional hazards model. The proximity of each hazard ratio (represented by a dot) to 1 denotes minimal effect on the risk of removal from office; a hazard ratio of 1 indicates no effect. The horizontal lines denote the 95% confidence intervals, and variables whose intervals cross the vertical reference line at 1 are not statistically significant at the 5% level.

As previously discussed, the hazard ratios for leaders in military regimes and "Other" regimes are both substantially above 1 and statistically significant at the 5% level, confirming their heightened vulnerability to removal. GDP per capita also attains statistical significance, albeit with a hazard ratio very close to 1, indicating a relatively modest substantive effect.

Although the hazard ratios for GDP growth and regime type (e.g., presidential or parliamentary) appear visually distant from 1, their respective confidence intervals intersect the vertical line, indicating a lack of statistical significance at conventional thresholds.

Most other variables display hazard ratios close to 1, suggesting that marginal changes in these predictors do not substantially alter the likelihood of political removal for leaders emerging from coups or autocoups.

Assessing the proportional hazards assumption

Evaluating the proportional hazards assumption is essential to ensure the validity of the Cox model estimates. This assumption was tested using a chi-squared test based on Schoenfeld residuals, which assesses whether the effects of covariates remain constant over time. The results indicate that neither the standard Cox PH model nor the time-dependent Cox model violates this assumption. The global p-values—0.12 for the standard model and 0.23 for the time-dependent model—exceed the conventional 5% significance threshold, thereby confirming that the proportional hazards assumption holds in both cases.

4.6 Summary

This chapter has examined the survival durations of political leaders who assumed office through irregular means—specifically coups and autocoups—by employing survival analysis techniques, including the Cox proportional hazards model and a time-dependent Cox model. While the standard Cox model indicated a marginally significant difference in the risk of removal between autocoup and coup-installed leaders, this association did not attain statistical significance in the time-dependent model, which offers a more rigorous specification by accounting for time-varying covariates.

The findings suggest that, once regime type and other pertinent covariates are controlled for, the method of accession—whether via coup or autocoup—does not independently determine leader survival. Rather, regime type emerges as a key determinant. Leaders operating within military or transitional ("other") regimes face significantly higher risks of removal than those in dominant-party systems. Furthermore, economic development, as measured by GDP per capita, and political violence significantly influence tenure length, whereas GDP growth, population size, and democratic quality (as captured by Polity V scores) do not exhibit statistically significant effects.

These results reinforce the central argument that institutional context—particularly regime characteristics—plays a more decisive role in shaping political longevity than the initial method of seizing power. This conclusion is consistent with earlier qualitative assessments and underscores the importance of integrating institutional and structural variables into analyses of political survival.

Methodologically, the chapter illustrates the utility of time-dependent modelling in political science, particularly where covariates evolve over time. It also contributes to the emerging literature on autocoups by offering one of the first systematic empirical assessments of their implications for political survival. However, reliance on a newly constructed dataset for autocoups introduces certain limitations, underscoring the need for further refinement and expansion in

future research.

In sum, this chapter provides empirical evidence supporting the proposition that regime characteristics, more than the mode of accession alone, shape the durability of irregular political leadership. These insights contribute to broader debates on authoritarian resilience, democratic backsliding, and the institutional foundations of political authority.

Chapter 5

Coups, Autocoups, and Democracy

Abstract

This chapter examines the impact of autocoups on political institutions, drawing comparisons with conventional coups through an analysis of changes in Polity V scores. It argues, first, that incumbent leaders often consolidate power by systematically weakening institutional constraints in the lead-up to an autocoup, resulting in a decline in Polity scores even prior to the formal event. Second, in contrast to coups—which exhibit varied outcomes with respect to democratisation—autocoups almost invariably precipitate democratic backsliding or the deepening of authoritarian rule. This is because autocoup leaders, in seeking to extend their tenure beyond constitutionally mandated limits, are explicitly motivated to dismantle institutional checks and balances.

Utilising a country-fixed effects model and drawing on datasets encompassing both coups and autocoups, the study demonstrates that Polity scores tend to decline both before and after an autocoup. In contrast, while coups typically lead to an immediate deterioration in democratic indicators, they may also create conditions for partial democratic recovery over time. These findings highlight the distinct political trajectories engendered by coups and autocoups.

This research addresses a significant lacuna in the empirical study of autocoups and con-

tributes to scholarly and policy-oriented debates by illuminating their deleterious effects, particularly in terms of democratic erosion and the consolidation of authoritarianism.

5.1 Introduction

The preceding chapters have defined the concept of an autocoup, introduced a novel dataset capturing such events, conducted empirical analyses on the determinants of autocoup attempts, and compared the post-event survival durations of coup-installed and autocoup leaders. A logical and important extension of this inquiry concerns the broader implications of autocoups. In particular, from a political science perspective: how do autocoups affect democratisation processes?

As previously noted, the absence of a comprehensive and widely accepted dataset on autocoups has meant that most discussions concerning their consequences have relied primarily on case studies (Baturo and Elgie, n.d.; Baturo and Tolstrup 2022). To move beyond case-specific narratives and towards a more systematic and comparative understanding, this chapter seeks to advance the first empirical investigation into the democratic consequences of autocoups. The initial objective, therefore, is to assess whether autocoups serve to entrench authoritarian rule, facilitate democratisation, or exert no substantive impact on regime type.

Given the conceptual and empirical parallels between coups and autocoups, a second key aim is to compare their respective effects on democratisation. While both phenomena disrupt existing political orders, their immediate and longer-term consequences may diverge significantly. Clarifying these differences is essential for evaluating their broader political implications.

To address these questions, the study draws upon an established dataset on coups in conjunction with a newly constructed dataset on autocoups. Employing a fixed-effects model, it assesses their respective impacts on levels of democracy, operationalised through the Polity Index. The findings indicate that both coups and autocoups are associated with an immediate decline in democratic quality. However, the short-term negative impact of coups is more pronounced. Crucially, while democracies affected by coups tend to show notable recovery within three years, those subject to autocoups display no significant improvement during the same period.

This study makes two principal contributions to the field of political science. First, it offers the inaugural empirical analysis of the impact of autocoups on democratisation, thereby addressing a significant gap in the existing literature. Second, by juxtaposing the effects of coups and autocoups—and demonstrating the more severe and enduring damage to democratic institutions caused by the latter—it highlights the necessity of treating autocoups as a distinct political phenomenon that merits greater scholarly and policy-oriented attention.

The remainder of this chapter is structured as follows. Section 2 examines the impact of autocoups on democratisation, with particular reference to 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 results and considering their significance for understanding and responding to autocoup dynamics.

5.2   Impact of autocoups on political change

As defined in Chapter 2, an autocoup refers to an incumbent leader extending their tenure beyond constitutionally mandated limits through extra-constitutional means. While the title or official position of the leader may change, the individual in power remains the same. In contrast to traditional coups, therefore, an autocoup does not result in genuine leadership turnover, elite restructuring, or regime transformation. The fundamental structure of rule remains intact.

This distinction bears significant implications. Since regime change seldom follows an autocoup, its political impact cannot be adequately assessed using conventional approaches. Typically, studies on coups and democratisation evaluate outcomes by estimating the likelihood of regime transitions—from autocracy to democracy or vice versa—as demonstrated in earlier research on the consequences of coups (C. L. Thyne and Powell 2014; Derpanopoulos et al. 2016; Miller 2016). However, this framework is ill-suited for autocoups, which do not typically induce formal regime transfers.

The absence of regime change does not, however, imply political stasis. On the contrary, autocoups invariably alter political dynamics and, in some instances, may precipitate substantial shifts. Consequently, a more suitable method for examining their political effects is through the analysis of democracy indices, such as those provided by the Polity5 dataset (Monty G. Marshall and Gurr 2020). The Polity V score—ranging from -10 (full autocracy) to +10 (full democracy)—captures gradual changes in regime characteristics, enabling the assessment of more nuanced shifts in political openness and institutional constraints, even in the absence of formal regime change. Similar analytical approach has been adopted in prior studies (Dahl and Gleditsch 2023b).

Although autocoups rarely bring about overt regime transformation, their implications for democratisation warrant serious consideration. Importantly, their effects differ from those of traditional coups in at least two key respects.

The pre-event effects versus post-event effects

First, unlike coups—typically characterised by sudden, definitive events such as the removal of a sitting leader—autocoups often unfold incrementally rather than through a singular, dramatic act. Incumbents intent on extending their rule generally begin preparing well in advance of the decisive action. This preparation may involve purging political elites, suppressing opposition parties, cracking down on dissent and protest, and curtailing media freedom. Without such pre-emptive measures, an autocoup would likely face robust resistance and, in the worst case, provoke a backlash that could result in the leader's rapid removal.

However, once the incumbent has successfully extended their tenure, continued repression is not always required. On the contrary, some leaders ease political restrictions in order to placate internal dissent and minimise international condemnation. This adaptive strategy is aimed at stabilising the post-autocoup political order.

As a result, the most significant political changes associated with autocoups often occur

prior to the final act itself. Once the autocoup is formalised, additional changes may be limited. By contrast, coup plotters—who are not incumbent leaders—lack the institutional power to influence political structures beforehand. Hence, the political consequences of coups tend to manifest in the aftermath rather than beforehand.

This distinction is borne out by empirical examples of autocoups.

One of the most frequently cited cases of an autocoup is Peru's 1992 episode, in which President Alberto Fujimori dissolved Congress, temporarily suspended the 1979 Constitution, and governed by decree until November of that year, when a Democratic Constituent Congress was elected to draft a new constitution (Maxwell A. Cameron 1998b). These actions, however, did not immediately result in an extension of Fujimori's tenure. Under the provisions of the 1979 Constitution, immediate presidential re-election was prohibited. To bypass this restriction, Fujimori initiated a process of constitutional reform, culminating in the adoption of a new constitution in 1993 that permitted re-election. This institutional change enabled him to secure a second term in 1995 (Baturo 2019).

Peru's Polity V scores illustrate the political repercussions of these developments. When Fujimori assumed office in 1990, the score stood at 8 and remained unchanged in 1991. However, following the dissolution of Congress in 1992, the score declined sharply to -4. Notably, with the adoption of the new constitution in 1993, the score recovered modestly to -1. This figure remained constant throughout the remainder of Fujimori's presidency until his resignation in 2000, indicating neither further deterioration nor significant recovery in democratic institutions as reflected in the Polity V index following the constitutional revision.

A comparable pattern is evident in Belarus under Alexander Lukashenko. Upon taking office in 1994, Belarus recorded a Polity V score of 8. In 1995, however, Lukashenko bypassed parliamentary opposition by calling a controversial referendum and threatening to dissolve the legislature, prompting a drop in the score to 0. Following the 1996 referendum, which extended his term, the score fell further to -7, where it has remained ever since—despite two further term extensions (Ash 2014; Baturo and Elgie, n.d.).

These cases illustrate a broader trend: the political effects of autocoups are often manifest before the final stage of the autocoup is executed, whereas the political consequences of traditional coups emerge predominantly after the event. This distinction has been explored in depth in previous studies.

Based on this analysis, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Autocoups primarily influence political change in advance of their execution, whereas coups tend to drive political change predominantly in their aftermath.

H5-1: Autocoups significantly reduce Polity V scores prior to their execution, whereas coups primarily decrease Polity V scores immediately following the event.

Consistent autocoup outcomes versus the varied impact of coups

Secondly, in contrast to the ambiguous effects of coups (Dahl and Gleditsch 2023b), autocoups seldom contribute to democratisation.

The relationship between coups and democratisation has been widely explored in the existing literature. Some scholars contend that coups—or even the credible threat thereof—can act as catalysts for democratic transition. One line of argument posits that coups generate a political "shock" which may create openings for liberalisation that would otherwise not arise (C. L. Thyne and Powell 2014). In a critical reappraisal, Derpanopoulos et al. (2016) questioned the presumed democratising effects of coups, prompting a series of scholarly exchanges with Miller (2016). More recently, Dahl and Gleditsch (2023b) advanced this debate by suggesting that coups may be followed by either democratic or autocratic transitions, depending in large part on the scale and character of popular mobilisation.

A frequently cited example of a so-called "pro-democracy coup" occurred in Niger in February 2010, when military forces removed President Mamadou Tandja after he had unconstitutionally extended his rule. The Supreme Council for the Restoration of Democracy (CSRD) assumed power, pledging a return to democratic governance. Their actions were widely wel-

comed, both by the domestic opposition and international observers, as a potential restoration of constitutional rule. In fulfilment of this commitment, the CSRD organised competitive elections in 2011, which brought Mahamadou Issoufou to the presidency (Miller 2016).

While debate continues over the long-term democratic implications of coups, it is evident that their outcomes are varied and context-dependent. In contrast, autocoups almost never facilitate democratic progress, nor do they lead to even marginal gains in political freedoms. This pattern is attributable to the very nature of autocoups, which undermine constitutional provisions for leadership succession—most notably, term limits.

Term limits are institutional mechanisms designed to curtail the monopolisation of political power. In both democratic and autocratic settings, they serve as critical safeguards against executive overreach. In democracies, term limits foster political accountability, leadership renewal, and reduce the risk of authoritarian backsliding. In autocracies, their enforcement can mitigate succession crises and offer rare windows for political transition. Conversely, when term limits are circumvented, political entrenchment becomes more likely, to the detriment of institutional development and democratic norms.

As outlined in Table 2.2 in Chapter 2, autocoups are executed through either pseudo-legal reforms or overtly unconstitutional means. These include amending or disregarding term limits, postponing or annulling elections, manipulating electoral outcomes, or refusing to accept adverse results. Although many autocoups retain a façade of legality, they are fundamentally characterised by their breach of constitutional constraints intended to prevent indefinite rule.

As discussed earlier, incumbent leaders often engage in institutional weakening well before they formally extend their tenure. Moreover, once entrenched, they seldom reverse repressive measures or meaningfully restore democratic freedoms, even if political pressures are temporarily relaxed.

Case studies from Peru and Belarus underscore the tendency of autocoups to precipitate declines in Polity scores, indicative of democratic erosion. However, it is important to note that most autocoups (two thirds) occur in regimes that are already authoritarian, where Polity scores

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are already low. This pattern mirrors broader trends observed in the coup literature, where coups disproportionately occur in autocratic contexts.

For example, in China's 2018 constitutional amendment, President Xi Jinping abolished presidential term limits, thereby allowing indefinite tenure[1]. Nonetheless, China's Polity score remained constant at -7, both before and after the amendment. This reflects the broader tendency in highly autocratic regimes (Polity scores below -6), where minimal democratic institutions exist and little further decline is statistically possible.

While most autocoups occur in low-scoring regimes, some have been recorded in relatively more democratic systems where the Polity score remained stable despite term limit circumvention. This is particularly evident in Latin America, where several presidents have amended "no immediate re-election" provisions to allow a second consecutive term, but later relinquished power voluntarily. Examples include Argentina (1993), where the Polity score remained at 7; Brazil (1997), where it held at 8; and Colombia (2004), where it stayed at 7. In these instances, term extensions were achieved within a functioning institutional framework, without further undermining democratic structures (Baturo 2019).

Across all cases mentioned above—whether in Peru, Belarus, China, Argentina, Brazil, or Colombia—there is no instance in which the Polity score increased following an autocoup. Within the autocoup dataset introduced in Chapter 3, only four cases—Guinea-Bissau (1988), Burkina Faso (1997), Congo-Brazzaville (2001), and Lebanon (2004)—exhibited slight increases in Polity scores, but these changes were negligible.

Unlike some coup leaders who claim democratic intent—as in Niger's 2010 example—autocoup leaders seldom, if ever, articulate such justifications. If the advancement of democracy were truly their objective, they would relinquish power in accordance with constitutional limits rather than dismantle them.

Based on this analysis, the second hypothesis is proposed:

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[1] **BBC News,** "China's Xi Allowed to Remain 'President for Life' as Term Limits Removed," *BBC News*, March 11, 2018, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-43361276, accessed March 14, 2025.

Autocoups typically result in a decline in the Polity Index and rarely see democratic recovery, whereas coups often allow for recovery and may even facilitate transitions from autocracy to democracy.

H5-2: Autocoups significantly reduce Polity V scores with minimal democratic recovery, whereas coups often allow recovery and sometimes improving democratic conditions.

5.3   Methodology and variables

Methodology

As previously discussed, autocoups are less likely to result in full regime transitions—whether from democracy to autocracy or vice versa. Consequently, it is inappropriate to evaluate their effects solely in terms of regime shifts or changes that surpass critical thresholds. Instead, this study assesses political change through variations in Polity V scores.

In contrast to conventional analyses of coups, which primarily focus on post-event consequences, this study examines both pre- and post-event effects of autocoups. Specifically, the pre-event impact is measured by the change in Polity V scores over the two-year period preceding the autocoup, calculated as:

$$Polity_{t-1} - Polity_{t-3}$$

Similarly, the post-event effect is measured by the change in Polity V scores over the three years following the autocoup, expressed as:

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

A three-year time frame is adopted for two principal reasons. First, political changes preceding an autocoup generally occur incrementally, as incumbents gradually consolidate power

rather than taking abrupt action. Second, post-event analysis is designed to capture medium-term developments rather than immediate shocks, as autocoups rarely produce rapid regime transitions. Instead, they typically serve to reinforce existing political structures. Short-term fluctuations, therefore, may be insufficient to reflect meaningful institutional transformation.

To estimate how political institutions evolve before and after autocoups, a linear model with country-case fixed effects is employed. For the analysis of pre-event effects, all attempted autocoups are included, on the grounds that prior to the event, it is unknown whether the attempt will succeed or fail.

Conversely, the analysis of post-event effects is restricted to successful autocoups, for three main reasons. First, the vast majority of autocoups are successful (64 out of 83 cases). Second, failed autocoups tend to produce immediate political disturbances rather than sustained medium- or long-term consequences. Third, failed attempts are frequently followed by significant disruptive events—such as coups, uprisings, or mass protests—which complicate efforts to isolate the effects of the autocoup itself. For example, in Niger, a failed autocoup in 2009 was swiftly followed by a coup in 2010, thereby entangling the political consequences of both episodes. In contrast, successful autocoups offer a more coherent analytical framework, as their effects are less likely to be confounded by subsequent disruptions, thus allowing for a more systematic evaluation of institutional change.

Variables

This study utilises a global sample of all country-year data from 1950 to 2020, employing a linear model to examine the effects of autocoups on political change. The dependent variable is the change in Polity scores, while the principal independent variable is the occurrence of an autocoup. The dataset comprises approximately 9,100 observations.

The dependent variable captures political change through two-year or three-year differences in Polity scores. Specifically, Model 1 (pre-event effects) is specified as: $Polity_{t-1} - $

$Polity_{t-3}$. Model 2 (post-event effects) is defined as: $Polity_{t+3} - Polity_t$.

Polity scores range from -10 (full autocracy) to +10 (full democracy). Certain values within the dataset—namely -66, -77, and -88—represent transitional regimes or periods of political uncertainty. To minimise data loss, these values are replaced with the closest valid Polity scores, thereby ensuring the analysis captures continuous changes in institutional quality rather than focusing exclusively on transitions that cross democratic thresholds.

The primary independent variable is the autocoup, as defined in Chapter 2. The dataset includes 83 attempted autocoups (used in the pre-event analysis) and 64 successful autocoups (used in the post-event analysis). For pre-event analysis, the autocoup variable is binary, coded as 1 if an attempted autocoup occurred and 0 otherwise.

In the post-event analysis, a decay function is applied to capture both immediate and delayed effects, following the approach of Dahl and Gleditsch (2023b). To assess the persistence of autocoup impacts, a half-life specification of five years is adopted, evaluating effects from the year of the autocoup (y_t) through to four years after (y_{t+4}).

Traditional coups are also included as a secondary independent variable for two main reasons. First, for comparative significance: a robust empirical comparison requires assessing whether autocoups differ meaningfully from coups in their political consequences. Second, due to overlapping events: autocoups and coups often occur in close proximity or causal sequence, making it necessary to distinguish their respective effects. The coup dataset employed is drawn from Powell and Thyne (2011). To ensure consistency, the same methodological framework used for autocoups is applied to coups—binary coding for pre-event effects and decay function coding for post-event effects.

Control variables include economic performance, political violence, and population size, all of which have been examined in previous chapters. Two additional dummy variables are incorporated. The first, 'non_democracy', accounts for regime type: countries with Polity scores below -6 are already autocratic and thus less susceptible to further decline, while those above 6 are more resilient to deterioration. The second, 'cold_war', reflects temporal context, follow-

ing prior research on the effects of coups on democratisation (C. L. Thyne and Powell 2014; Derpanopoulos et al. 2016; Dahl and Gleditsch 2023b). This variable captures broader geopolitical trends, notably the general decline in Polity scores during the Cold War (1960s–1990), followed by a tendency towards democratisation after 1990.

5.4 Results and discussion

Pre-event effects

This section begins by analysing the trajectory of Polity scores in the lead-up to autocoup events. As shown in Models 1 to 4 in Table 5.1, Column 1 presents the empirical results for pre-event effects, focusing on changes observed over the two-year period preceding the event. Consistent with the first hypothesis, Polity V scores demonstrate a statistically significant decline in the two years prior to an autocoup. Notably, traditional coups exhibit no statistically significant effects on Polity V scores in the period preceding the events.

Model 1 specifically examines the change in Polity V scores between year $t - 3$ (three years before the event) and year $t - 1$ (the year immediately preceding the event), expressed as $Polity_{t-1} - Polity_{t-3}$. The results indicate a statistically significant average decline of 0.67 points in Polity scores during this period prior to an autocoup, after controlling for other variables. By contrast, the analysis reveals no significant change in Polity scores prior to traditional coups, suggesting that the periods leading up to such coups do not exert a measurable influence on levels of democratisation.

Event-year effects

Model 2 evaluates the immediate impact by comparing Polity scores in the year of the autocoup or coup with those of the preceding year, calculated as $Polity_t - Polity_{t-1}$. As previously noted, the year in which an autocoup or coup occurs typically registers a substantial disruption

Table 5.1: The Impacts on Democratization(1950–2018): Autocoups vs coups

	Dependent variable: Differences of Polity scores			
	Pre-event	Event-year	Post-event	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Autocoup	−0.666**	−1.276***	−0.338	−0.130
	(0.297)	(0.201)	(0.322)	(0.360)
Coup	0.106	−1.312***	1.203***	1.868***
	(0.133)	(0.091)	(0.127)	(0.183)
GDP per Capita	−0.006***	−0.003**	−0.009***	−0.010***
	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Economic Trend	−0.519	−0.428	−0.563	−0.635
	(0.401)	(0.277)	(0.480)	(0.480)
Log Population	0.502***	0.178**	0.755***	0.734***
	(0.102)	(0.070)	(0.122)	(0.122)
Political Violence	0.025	0.015	0.033	0.033
	(0.020)	(0.014)	(0.024)	(0.024)
Non-Democracy	0.087	0.809***	−0.776***	−0.775***
	(0.090)	(0.062)	(0.109)	(0.109)
Cold War	−0.133	−0.235***	−0.092	−0.116
	(0.091)	(0.063)	(0.109)	(0.109)
Observations	9,104	9,104	9,104	9,104
R^2	0.009	0.047	0.028	0.030
Adjusted R^2	−0.011	0.029	0.009	0.011
F Statistic	9.998***	55.436***	32.690***	34.462***

Note: *$p<0.1$; **$p<0.05$; ***$p<0.01$

to political institutions. Accordingly, both types of events are associated with a notable decline in Polity scores relative to the prior year.

The magnitude of the negative effect is comparable across both event types: on average, Polity scores decrease by 1.3 points following either an autocoup or a coup, holding other variables constant. These findings suggest that, although autocoups have received less scholarly and public attention than coups, they nonetheless exert similarly significant immediate effects on institutional democratic quality as measured by the Polity index.

Mid-term effects: comparing attempted and successful autocoups

Models 3 and 4 present the empirical findings on the mid-term effects of autocoups, assessing changes in Polity scores three years after the events. These effects are measured as $Polity_{t+3}-Polity_t$, with Model 3 focusing on attempted autocoups and Model 4 on successful ones.

Model 3 evaluates the impact of attempted autocoups. The analysis reveals no statistically significant change in Polity scores following such attempts. This finding contrasts with attempted coups, which are associated with an average increase of 1.2 points in Polity scores over the same period, controlling for other variables.

Model 4 considers the consequences of successful autocoups. Similar to attempted autocoups, the results do not indicate any statistically significant changes in Polity scores three years after the event. In contrast, successful coups are linked to a positive trajectory in democratisation, with an average increase of 1.87 points in Polity scores within three years, all else being equal.

These findings offer several important insights. First, neither attempted nor successful autocoups produce discernible changes in Polity scores over the mid-term. This suggests that the effects of autocoups are primarily front-loaded, exerting their influence in the lead-up to the event rather than in its aftermath. Coups, by contrast, tend to generate significant post-event dynamics.

Second, autocoups generally have a negative and unidirectional impact on democratic institutions, primarily eroding democratic quality before the event without subsequent recovery. In contrast, coups exhibit a more complex temporal pattern: they often trigger an immediate shock and decline in democratic indicators, but this is frequently followed by recovery—or even overshooting—where the democracy index not only returns to its pre-coup level but may surpass it within two to three years.

Effects of control variables

To ensure the robustness of the empirical findings, the models incorporate a range of control variables. While economic trends, political violence, and the Cold War (which is only statistically significant in the event year) do not exhibit consistent or significant effects on Polity scores, several other variables merit further discussion.

The effects of GDP per capita, population size, and regime type reveal a more nuanced pattern. Counterintuitively, higher levels of GDP per capita are associated with lower Polity scores, whereas non-democratic regimes and larger populations are linked to positive changes in Polity scores. This seemingly paradoxical result can be understood by considering the baseline differences between democratic and non-democratic regimes.

In established democracies, Polity scores are already close to the upper end of the scale, leaving limited scope for further increases. These states also tend to exhibit higher GDP per capita and lower population growth rates, factors that are typically associated with political and institutional stability. As a result, their Polity scores tend to remain stable over time.

By contrast, non-democratic regimes begin from a lower baseline in the Polity index, thus allowing for greater potential improvement. These regimes often experience weaker economic performance and more rapid population growth, but may also be more likely to undergo political liberalisation or reform, contributing to upward shifts in Polity scores.

Taken together, these findings lend empirical support to both core hypotheses. First, the

principal effects of autocoups on Polity scores materialise prior to the events themselves. Second, while the consequences of coups for democratisation are mixed and context-dependent, the impact of autocoups is both consistent and unidirectional—uniformly negative.

Robustness tests

To evaluate the sensitivity of the main findings to alternative model specifications, I conduct a series of robustness tests. The results indicate that the core conclusions remain stable across these variations.

First, I assess the effects of autocoups over a period ranging from one to five years following the event. The analysis, as shown in Models 5 to 9 in Table 5.2, reveals that the effects of coups remain positive and statistically significant throughout the five-year period, with a general trend of increasing magnitude over time. In contrast, the effects of autocoups remain negative across all five years but do not attain statistical significance at any point. This finding corroborates the earlier hypothesis that autocoups do not lead to increases in Polity scores.

Subsequently, I refine the operationalisation of the autocoup variable by replacing the decay function with a binary indicator distinguishing between attempted and successful autocoups. Additionally, I disaggregate the 'non-democracy' category into more specific regime types—namely dominant-party, military, personalist, presidential, parliamentary, and "other" regimes—in line with the autocoup determinants analysis, using dominant-party as the reference category. The results of these models are presented Models 10 to 13 in Table 5.3.

Models 10 and 11 in Table 5.3 assess the effects of attempted autocoups, measured two and three years after the event, respectively, while Models 12 and 13 focus on successful autocoups. As with the primary models, these specifications do not alter the main findings: autocoups continue to exhibit no statistically significant effects on Polity scores two or three years post-event, whereas coups consistently produce positive and statistically significant increases in the same periods. The control variables GDP per capita and population size likewise yield results

Table 5.2: The Impact of Autocoups on Democratization: one to five years

	Dependent variable: Differences of Polity scores				
	Years after the event				
	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Autocoup	−0.212	−0.139	−0.130	−0.069	0.088
	(0.207)	(0.298)	(0.360)	(0.415)	(0.457)
Coup	0.452***	1.250***	1.868***	2.121***	2.334***
	(0.108)	(0.153)	(0.183)	(0.206)	(0.227)
GDP per Capita	−0.004***	−0.007***	−0.010***	−0.014***	−0.018***
	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Economic Trend	−0.211	−0.392	−0.635	−0.902*	−1.488**
	(0.280)	(0.400)	(0.480)	(0.541)	(0.593)
Log Population	0.297***	0.554***	0.734***	0.899***	1.062***
	(0.071)	(0.101)	(0.122)	(0.137)	(0.150)
Political Violence	0.010	0.022	0.033	0.051*	0.063**
	(0.014)	(0.020)	(0.024)	(0.027)	(0.030)
Non-Democracy	0.758***	0.034	−0.775***	−1.499***	−2.128***
	(0.064)	(0.090)	(0.109)	(0.122)	(0.134)
Cold War	−0.225***	−0.143	−0.116	−0.130	−0.179
	(0.064)	(0.091)	(0.109)	(0.123)	(0.135)
Observations	9,104	9,104	9,104	9,104	9,104
R^2	0.023	0.016	0.030	0.048	0.065
Adjusted R^2	0.003	−0.004	0.011	0.029	0.047
F Statistic	25.940***	17.745***	34.462***	55.683***	77.997***

Note: $^*p<0.1$; $^{**}p<0.05$; $^{***}p<0.01$

Table 5.3: The Impact of Autocoups on Democratization: Dummy autocoups

| | Dependent variable: Differences of Polity scores | | | |
| | Attempted | | Succeeded | |
	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)
Autocoup	−0.093	−0.148	−0.043	−0.057
	(0.298)	(0.359)	(0.335)	(0.402)
Coup	0.814***	1.240***	0.959***	1.712***
	(0.132)	(0.157)	(0.180)	(0.215)
GDP per Capita	−0.006***	−0.010***	−0.006***	−0.010***
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Economic Trend	−0.337	−0.569	−0.405	−0.629
	(0.402)	(0.482)	(0.402)	(0.482)
Log Population	0.667***	0.890***	0.650***	0.879***
	(0.105)	(0.126)	(0.105)	(0.126)
Political Violence	0.027	0.044*	0.028	0.046*
	(0.020)	(0.024)	(0.020)	(0.024)
Regime: Military	−0.122	−0.545***	−0.118	−0.584***
	(0.148)	(0.177)	(0.148)	(0.178)
Personal	−0.343**	−0.532***	−0.330**	−0.526***
	(0.136)	(0.164)	(0.136)	(0.164)
Presidential	−0.153	0.399**	−0.152	0.381**
	(0.132)	(0.158)	(0.132)	(0.158)
Parliamentary	0.131	0.965***	0.136	0.966***
	(0.152)	(0.182)	(0.152)	(0.182)
Other	1.077***	1.094***	1.086***	1.115***
	(0.165)	(0.199)	(0.165)	(0.199)
Cold War	−0.048	−0.002	−0.054	−0.011
	(0.092)	(0.111)	(0.092)	(0.111)
Observations	9,036	9,036	9,036	9,036
R^2	0.020	0.033	0.019	0.033
Adjusted R^2	0.0004	0.014	−0.001	0.014
F Statistic	15.237***	25.244***	14.407***	25.364***

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

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consistent with the baseline models.

However, political violence and regime type display differing effects depending on the time horizon. Political violence exhibits marginal statistical significance in the three-year post-event models (Models 11 and 13) but not in the two-year models (Models 10 and 12) . Although modest in magnitude, a one-point increase in the political violence index is associated with a 0.045 increase in the Polity score after three years.

Among the disaggregated regime types, military regimes consistently correlate with declines in Polity scores, though statistical significance emerges only in the three-year period and does not differ between attempted and successful events. Personalist and "other" regimes demonstrate consistent and statistically significant effects across all four models, albeit in opposite directions: personalist regimes are associated with negative effects, while "other" regimes (typically transitional or provisional regimes) show positive effects. This suggests that transitional regimes frequently move towards greater levels of democracy. Finally, both presidential and parliamentary democracies display positive and statistically significant effects in the three-year models, though not in the two-year models.

5.5   Summary

This chapter investigates the impact of autocoups on political institutions—particularly in comparison to coups—by analysing their effects on changes in Polity V scores. It tests two central hypotheses. First, that unlike coups, the effects of autocoups on Polity scores primarily manifest prior to the event, suggesting that leaders consolidate power in anticipation of executing an autocoup. Second, whereas coups tend to produce a "U-shaped" effect—marked by an initial decline in Polity scores followed by a recovery to prior levels or beyond—autocoups are consistently associated with sustained declines, indicating democratic backsliding or authoritarian entrenchment.

To evaluate these hypotheses, the chapter conducts a series of robustness checks, including

variations in the time horizon, alternative model specifications, and different variable operationalisations. The core finding is that these alternative models yield results consistent with the main analysis.

The implications of these findings are significant for both academic scholarship and policymaking. While coups have traditionally received considerable attention in studies of democratisation, this chapter contends that autocoups merit equal—if not greater—focus due to their systematic role in reversing democratic progress. Unlike coups, which may occasionally serve as catalysts for reform and transitions from autocracy to democracy, autocoups almost invariably consolidate authoritarian rule, weaken political institutions, and erode democratic governance. Furthermore, as demonstrated in Chapter 4, leaders who carry out autocoups tend to remain in power for nearly ten years on average, compared to less than seven years for coup-installed leaders. This suggests that the detrimental effects of autocoups may be more enduring than those of coups.

This chapter also makes a methodological contribution to the study of democratic processes by highlighting the importance of pre-event dynamics in analysing the effects of political shocks. Previous research has largely concentrated on post-event consequences; by contrast, this chapter demonstrates that significant political changes can precede events such as autocoups.

Nevertheless, certain limitations remain that future research should address. Coups and autocoups sometimes occur in close succession—either in the same year or within a short interval—which complicates efforts to isolate their respective impacts on Polity scores. Disentangling these overlapping effects remains a methodological challenge and represents a valuable avenue for future inquiry.

In conclusion, this chapter strengthens the argument that autocoups represent a critical yet under-explored mechanism of democratic backsliding. As such, they warrant further investigation to better understand their implications for global patterns of democratisation and authoritarian resilience.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

This study has systematically compared coups and autocoups, two distinct forms of irregular leadership transitions, to deepen our understanding of how power dynamics shape leadership change, survival, and their impact on political institutions. Through conceptual refinement, the construction of a novel dataset, and multi-faceted empirical analysis, this thesis has shed light on the similarities and differences between coups and autocoups in terms of their drivers, the fate of leaders, and their democratic consequences.

6.1 Main findings

A central contribution of this research lies in the incorporation of autocoups—an often overlooked phenomenon—into the analytical framework of irregular transfers of power. Based on this framework, the study yields the following principal findings:

First, in terms of conceptualisation and empirical grounding, this study addresses the prevailing conceptual fragmentation marked by the proliferation of overlapping and inconsistently applied terms such as self-coup, autogolpe, and executive aggrandisement, alongside a dearth of systematic data (Marsteintredet and Malamud 2019; Baturo and Tolstrup 2022). To resolve this, **Chapter 2** proposes a more analytically rigorous definition of an autocoup: the act of an

incumbent leader extending their constitutionally mandated term through extra-constitutional means. Building upon this definition, this chapter introduces and makes publicly available the first global dataset on autocoup events, encompassing 83 attempted (64 successful) cases from 1945 to 2023. This provides a robust empirical foundation for future quantitative analyses.

Second, to address the paucity of large-N empirical studies on the determinants of autocoup attempts, **Chapter 3** presents pioneering research which finds that regime type significantly affects the likelihood of autocoup occurrence. In contrast to traditional coups—which typically emerge in unstable or fragmented political systems such as military regimes (J. Powell 2012; Frantz and Stein 2017a; Powell et al. 2018; Thyne and Powell 2019; Kim and Sudduth 2021)—autocoups are more prevalent in regimes characterised by concentrated and relatively stable executive power. The empirical analysis demonstrates that presidential democracies and personalist authoritarian regimes are significantly more susceptible to autocoup attempts than dominant-party regimes. This pattern reflects the fragility of institutional constraints and the centralisation of authority in such systems.

Third, although leadership survival has been extensively examined in the literature (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003; Svolik 2014; Frantz and Stein 2016; Sudduth and Bell 2018; Davenport, RezaeeDaryakenari, and Wood 2021), few studies have focused on post-autocoup leader survival. **Chapter 4** addresses this gap by investigating tenure differences between coup-installed and autocoup leaders. While preliminary analysis suggested that autocoup leaders tend to remain in office longer, a time-dependent Cox proportional hazards model—controlling for key covariates such as regime type—found no statistically significant difference in the risk of removal based solely on the method of power acquisition. Rather, regime characteristics emerged as the critical determinant of leadership survival: leaders in military and transitional regimes face a significantly higher risk of removal than their counterparts in dominant-party regimes. These findings suggest that the durability of irregular leadership depends more on institutional context than on the particular mode of power seizure.

Finally, whereas the existing literature has predominantly examined the effects of coups on

democratic outcomes (C. L. Thyne and Powell 2014; Derpanopoulos et al. 2016; Miller 2016; Dahl and Gleditsch 2023a), **Chapter 5** undertakes a novel analysis of the democratic consequences of autocoups. The findings reveal that autocoups differ markedly from traditional coups in their democratic impact. Specifically, autocoups are frequently preceded by a gradual erosion of democratic institutions (pre-event effects) and are consistently associated with sustained democratic backsliding or the consolidation of authoritarian rule (post-event effects). In contrast, while traditional coups often cause an immediate decline in democratic indicators, they may, in some cases, facilitate conditions conducive to democratic recovery or transition. This underscores the uniquely detrimental and enduring role that autocoups play in undermining democratic governance.

6.2   Policy implications

The findings of this study not only enhance academic understanding of irregular transfers of power but also offer significant insights for policy-makers, particularly in addressing global democratic backsliding and reinforcing the resilience of political institutions.

First, the importance of institutional design is underscored. **Chapter 3** demonstrates that regimes characterised by highly centralised executive authority are more vulnerable to autocoups, echoing earlier scholarship that highlights the pivotal role of regime type and institutional architecture (Geddes 1999a; Frantz and Stein 2017b). Strengthening mechanisms of horizontal accountability—such as independent legislatures, judiciaries, and oversight bodies—is thus essential for limiting executive overreach and preventing incumbents from circumventing constitutional constraints. Key institutional safeguards include robust and enforceable term limits, a vibrant and empowered civil society, and codified, transparent procedures for political succession. These components are critical in constructing institutional bulwarks against autocoups and the entrenchment of authoritarian rule.

Second, international and regional responses must become more nuanced and proactive.

While the global community has developed relatively standardised mechanisms for addressing military coups, **Chapters 4 and 5** highlight that autocoups often unfold more subtly and incrementally. Consequently, international and regional organisations—such as the African Union (AU), the Organisation of American States (OAS), and the European Union (EU)—must adopt a more vigilant posture (Wobig 2014; Shannon et al. 2014; C. Thyne et al. 2017). Beyond condemning and sanctioning overt military takeovers, these bodies should exert sustained diplomatic and economic pressure against attempts to subvert constitutional term limits through formal amendments, manipulated electoral processes, or other means that undermine democratic integrity. In doing so, they can play a more active role in upholding democratic norms and deterring executive aggrandisement.

Finally, as **Chapter 5** illustrates, the use of gradual and incremental monitoring tools—such as Polity scores—warrants greater attention (Dahl and Gleditsch 2023a). Autocoups lack the abrupt and visible character of military coups; instead, they often proceed under the guise of legality and institutional continuity, making them more difficult to detect and counter in real time. Accordingly, policy-makers, scholars, and civil society actors should prioritise the systematic observation of democratic indicators, including nuanced shifts in Polity scores, Freedom House ratings, and V-Dem indices. This form of monitoring is essential for identifying early warning signs of executive overreach and the gradual erosion of democratic safeguards, thereby enabling the timely implementation of preventative interventions.

6.3   Limitations and directions for future research

While this study has made progress in the conceptualization, data, and empirical analysis of irregular leadership transitions, it also has limitations that suggest avenues for future research.

Firstly, there is still room for refinement of concepts and datasets. The concept of autocoup proposed in **Chapter 2** and the dataset constructed are preliminary; further discussion and consensus within the academic community are needed to refine the boundaries of autocoups.

Specifically, how to handle "borderline cases" where term limits are circumvented through legal or quasi-legal means requires more detailed coding rules and judgement criteria. Future research can further refine the autocoup dataset by adding cases and cross-validating with existing datasets.

Secondly, methodological challenges need to be addressed. In analysing the determinants of autocoup attempts, **Chapter 3** treated autocoup attempts as a binary outcome. However, autocoups can be a continuous process, and leaders may make multiple attempts. Future research could explore more refined time-series analysis methods to capture the dynamics and sequencing of autocoup behaviour. Furthermore, coups and autocoups are sometimes closely linked, and effectively isolating their respective impacts remains a persistent methodological challenge.

Thirdly, expanding the scope of research is important. This study primarily focused on term extension as a specific form of executive power expansion, but leadership power expansion also includes other forms that do not involve overt term extension (e.g., weakening the legislature, controlling the judiciary) (Marsteintredet and Malamud 2019; Baturo and Tolstrup 2022). These forms of power expansion themselves impact institutional resilience and democratic quality and may be related to attempts at term prolongation. Future research could attempt to construct a more comprehensive dataset on executive power expansion and integrate it into the analytical framework to more fully understand the mechanisms of authoritarian consolidation and democratic backsliding.

Through the comparative analysis of coups and autocoups, this study has enhanced our understanding of the complexities of irregular power transfers. Autocoups, as a distinct strategy of authoritarian consolidation, with their gradual, hidden nature and continuous erosion of democratic institutions, represent a significant challenge to contemporary global democracy. This research provides an empirical foundation for understanding the drivers and consequences of autocoups and aims to stimulate further research to collectively address this important political phenomenon. Through continued conceptual clarification, data accumulation, and mechanism

exploration, we can better understand the resilience of authoritarianism, the fragility of democratic institutions, and the complex pathways of political change.

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Appendix: Datasets

- **Coup Model Dataset**

  – **Dataset Name: `coup_model.csv`**

  – **Description:** This dataset is specifically cleaned for the coup model and contains the relevant data points necessary for analysis.

- **Autocoup Dataset**

  – **Dataset Name: `autocoup.csv`**

  – **Description:** This original dataset was compiled to support the study's empirical objectives.

- **Autocoup Model Dataset**

  – **Dataset Name: `autocoup_model.csv`**

  – **Description:** This dataset is cleaned for the autocoup model and includes the data required for the modelling process.

- **Cox Proportional Hazards (Cox PH) Model Dataset**

  – **Dataset Name: `survival_cox_ph_model.csv`**

  – **Description:** This dataset is used for the Cox Proportional Hazards model and contains the data necessary for analysing survival rates and hazard ratios.

- **Time-Dependent Cox Model Dataset**

  – **Dataset Name:** `survival_cox_td_model.csv`

  – **Description:** This dataset is cleaned for the time-dependent Cox model, incorporating variables that account for time-dependent effects in survival analysis.