

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

Zhu Qi

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Abstract

This thesis addresses a significant gap in the literature on irregular leadership transitions by systematically integrating autocalps—cases where incumbent leaders extend their constitutionally mandated terms through extra-constitutional means. It refines the conceptual definition of autocalps, resolving existing ambiguities to align them more closely with conventional coup frameworks. Based on this refined definition, the thesis presents a novel global dataset of autocalp events from 1945 to 2023, encompassing 83 documented cases, of which 64 were successful.

Using this dataset, the study conducts a large-N analysis to identify the structural determinants of autocalps. The findings reveal that regimes with concentrated executive power, such as presidential democracies and personalist regimes, are significantly more prone to employing autocalps as a strategy for power retention compared to other regime types. This pattern contrasts with traditional coups, which have historically been more prevalent in military regimes.

The analysis subsequently examines leadership survival, utilising survival analysis techniques to evaluate the political longevity of leaders who assumed office through regular means, traditional coups, or autocalps. Contrary to the hypothesis that the mode of power acquisition significantly influences leadership survival—particularly the expectation that autocalp leaders would enjoy longer tenures than those installed through traditional coups—the results suggest that, when excluding very short-lived tenures (i.e., less than 180 days), the mode of accession does not exert a statistically significant effect on leadership duration; instead, regime type emerges as the primary determinant: leaders in military and personalist regimes exhibit significantly higher hazard ratios for removal compared to the reference category of dominant-party

regimes, consistent with trends observed following traditional coups.

The thesis further explores the broader institutional consequences of irregular power transitions, focusing on their impact on democratisation. Using Polity V scores as a proxy for democratic quality and applying a country-fixed effects model, the analysis finds that autocoups are associated with a sustained decline in democratic indicators, both immediately after the event and over a two-year period; in contrast, traditional coups exhibit a “U-shaped” effect: although Polity V scores decline sharply in the immediate aftermath, they typically recover to pre-coup levels within two years. These findings highlight the divergent political trajectories triggered by coups and autocoups, underscoring the need for increased scholarly and policy attention to the persistently detrimental impact of autocoups on democratic governance.

Collectively, these findings illuminate the distinct characteristics, causes, and impacts of coups and autocoups. The research makes several substantive contributions: it clarifies the conceptual boundaries of autocoups, provides a new empirical foundation for their systematic study, and offers robust comparative insights into how different modes of irregular power transition affect leadership survival and institutional development. These findings have significant implications for academic scholarship and policy-making, 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

Why are some political leaders removed from office prematurely, while others successfully extend their tenure beyond constitutionally mandated limits? Moreover, how does the mode of their survival or removal influence political stability and democratic institutions? This thesis addresses these critical questions by analysing the structural and strategic foundations of irregular leadership transitions.

1.1 Rationale

The stability and resilience of political systems hinge on the orderly transfer of power. Leadership transitions that occur within established institutional frameworks reinforce political legitimacy and enhance regime durability. Conversely, the breakdown of conventional mechanisms for political succession often precipitates instability, violence, and democratic backsliding. Among the most disruptive of these breakdowns are irregular leadership transitions, which leave enduring institutional legacies and fundamentally alter the political trajectories of regimes. Understanding the causes and consequences of such events is central to the study of political order and regime change.

The existing literature identifies diverse catalysts for irregular leadership exits, including

civil wars (Kokkonen and Sundell 2019), international conflicts (Mesquita and Siverson 1995), and ethnic divisions (Londregan, Bienen, and Walle 1995). Other factors include economic crises (M. K. Miller 2012; Krishnarajan 2019) and natural disasters (Quiroz Flores and Smith 2012). Among these, coups d'état are particularly significant due to their frequency and direct displacement of incumbent leaders. In autocratic regimes, coups account for nearly one-third of all leadership exits, surpassing 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 garnered extensive scholarly attention, with a substantial body of research exploring their causes, outcomes, and long-term implications for democracy and development (Thyne and Powell 2019). 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).

In contrast, autocoups—in which incumbent leaders extend their constitutionally mandated terms through extra-constitutional means, often by violating or circumventing provisions such as term limits or succession rules—have received comparatively limited academic attention. Although autocoups do not result in an immediate change of leadership, they constitute a fundamental breach of institutional norms governing political succession and disrupt the expected regular transfer of power. Accordingly, they warrant classification as a critical, yet underexamined, form of irregular leadership transition.

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

The urgency of this inquiry is underscored by the significant risks associated with irregular

transitions. Both coups and autocoups can trigger immediate crises—ranging from institutional paralysis to civil unrest—and leave lasting institutional scars. More fundamentally, they often dismantle constitutional checks and balances, undermine electoral processes, and accelerate democratic decline or authoritarian consolidation.

Historical cases vividly illustrate these dangers. Ghana’s turbulent period from 1979 to 1984 exemplifies 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 orchestrated another coup in 1981 and subsequently suppressed three further coup attempts ([Haynes 2022](#)). By contrast, the 1992 autocoup in Peru, led by President Alberto Fujimori, demonstrates 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 pertinent in the contemporary 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 underscores the pressing need to understand the mechanisms that facilitate it, including both coups and autocoups.

This thesis aims to advance the theoretical and empirical understanding of irregular leadership transitions. It offers insights with significant implications for scholarly research and policy formulation, particularly in fragile or democratising regimes.

1.2 Research objectives and contributions

In response to the significant challenges posed by irregular leadership transitions, this study undertakes a comprehensive comparative analysis structured around four core research objectives. Firstly, it aims to refine the conceptual definition of autocoups and develop a novel dataset suit-

able for large-N empirical analysis. Secondly, it seeks to identify the structural and institutional determinants of autocoups through systematic quantitative investigation. Thirdly, it compares the survival prospects of leaders who assume power through traditional coups with those who extend their tenure via autocoups. Finally, it evaluates the divergent impacts of coups and autocoups on democratisation trajectories and the resilience of political institutions.

By examining both coups and autocoups from 1945 to 2023, this thesis addresses a critical 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 approach, 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 enhances conceptual clarity by situating autocoups within the broader typology of irregular power transitions. It provides a refined definition of autocoups, focusing on the executive's unilateral extension of tenure through extra-constitutional means, and clearly distinguishes them from executive aggrandisement and traditional military coups. Building on this conceptual framework, the study introduces an original dataset of autocoup events from 1945 to 2023, documenting 83 incidents, of which 64 were successful. This dataset addresses a long-standing empirical gap and establishes a robust foundation for systematic comparative analysis, enabling future research into a previously understudied form of institutional disruption.

First empirical analysis of autocoup determinants: Utilising the newly compiled dataset, the thesis conducts the first empirical examination of the structural and institutional conditions conducive to autocoups. The analysis reveals that leaders in power-concentrated systems—particularly presidential democracies and personalist regimes—are significantly more likely to extend their tenure through autocoups compared to those in other regime types. These findings contribute to the literature on the interplay between regime characteristics and irregular power retention, highlighting the pivotal role of institutional structures in shaping leaders' strategic decisions to circumvent term limits.

Comparative analysis of leadership longevity: The research advances the study of leadership survival by comparing the tenure durations of leaders who attain power through regular means, traditional coups, or autocoups. Employing survival analysis, the study finds that, contrary to expectations, the mode of power acquisition does not significantly predict leadership longevity. However, it reaffirms the decisive influence of regime type on leader survival, regardless of the mode of accession or retention. The survival models indicate that leaders in military and personalist regimes face higher hazard ratios for removal compared to those in dominant-party regimes. These results underscore the critical influence of regime structure on leadership durability and elite turnover.

Comparative democratic implications of coups and autocoups: The thesis further investigates the differential impacts of coups and autocoups on democratic development. Using country-fixed effects regression models and Polity V scores as an indicator of democratic quality, the analysis demonstrates that autocoups are associated with a gradual and sustained decline in Polity V scores, both immediately following the event and over a two-year period. In contrast, coups result in a “U-shaped” institutional outcome: while they precipitate immediate declines in Polity V scores, these typically recover to pre-event levels within two years. This disaggregated analysis illuminates the distinct trajectories and institutional consequences of different forms of irregular power transitions.

Collectively, these contributions provide a robust theoretical and empirical foundation for understanding the dynamics of irregular leadership transitions, offering significant insights for both academic scholarship and policy formulation in the context of democratic resilience and institutional stability.

1.3 Policy implications

Although scholarly debate continues regarding the potential for coups to inadvertently foster democratisation under specific circumstances ([C. Thyne and Powell 2014](#); [Derpanopoulos et](#)

al. 2016; M. K. Miller 2016), a robust policy consensus holds that coups represent inherently illegitimate mechanisms of political change. As violent disruptions of constitutional order, they typically inflict immediate institutional damage, precipitate instability, and result in unpredictable political trajectories. Consequently, both international and domestic policy responses have prioritised prevention, most notably through ‘coup-proofing’ strategies aimed at insulating regimes from military intervention or elite defection (Quinlivan 1999; Pilster and Böhmelt 2012; J. Powell 2012a; 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 often more critical in determining vulnerability to both coups and autocoups.

The findings of this study yield several important policy implications, particularly in the domains of institutional design, international responses, and the monitoring of democratic backsliding. In terms of institutional design, the research highlights the heightened susceptibility of power-concentrated systems—such as presidential democracies and personalist regimes—to autocoups. This underscores the importance of reinforcing institutional checks and balances through mechanisms such as independent judiciaries, robust legislative oversight, and clearly defined constitutional term limits, all of which serve to constrain executive overreach and mitigate the risk of extra-constitutional power consolidation. With regard to international responses, the persistent democratic erosion associated with autocoups—evidenced by sustained declines in Polity V scores—calls for proactive diplomatic and economic interventions. These may include targeted sanctions, conditional aid, or other measures aimed at deterring incumbent leaders from circumventing constitutional safeguards in an effort to prolong their tenure. Moreover, the effective monitoring of democratic backsliding requires more sophisticated frameworks capable of detecting early warning signs of autocoups. These signs often manifest in gradual and legally veiled efforts to undermine term-limit provisions or manipulate electoral processes, in contrast to the more abrupt and overt power seizures typical of traditional coups. These policy

implications, which call for tailored approaches to address the distinct dynamics of coups and autocoups, will be examined further in the concluding chapter.

1.4 Limitations and future research

Whilst this study proposes a novel analytical framework for understanding coups and autocoups, their impact on leadership survival, and their broader institutional consequences, several limitations persist, pointing to significant opportunities for future research and refinement.

A primary challenge lies in the conceptual ambiguity surrounding the definition of autocoups, particularly in borderline cases where incumbents extend their authority through legal or quasi-legal mechanisms. Future research could explore the normative and analytical trade-offs of including such cases within the autocoup category. Comparative analyses of ‘un-constitutional’ versus ‘extra-constitutional’ extensions of executive tenure may help determine whether these actions represent variants of the same phenomenon or distinct processes. President Manuel Zelaya’s 2009 attempt to amend the Honduran constitution to permit future re-election triggered a military coup that removed him from office ([Muñoz-Portillo and Treminio 2019](#)). This case exemplifies the analytical complexity of identifying autocoups and highlights the need for refined coding criteria and greater interpretive clarity in future data collection efforts.

Given the long-term decline in traditional coups and the concurrent rise of autocoups, increased scholarly focus on the latter is essential. Although this study centres on tenure extension as the defining characteristic of autocoups, broader forms of executive power expansion—whether within or beyond formal constitutional frameworks—warrant systematic investigation. The development of a dedicated dataset on executive power expansion would be a critical step towards capturing the full spectrum of such practices.

Furthermore, the decreasing frequency of overt and dramatic regime transitions since the early 2000s, coupled with a reduction in clear shifts between democracy and autocracy, high-

lights the need for more sensitive analytical tools to detect incremental changes within regimes. Future empirical research should prioritise the identification and measurement of these subtler transformations to better understand their implications for regime stability and democratic resilience.

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

1.5 Overview of the thesis

This thesis examines the intricate power dynamics underlying coups and autoups, focusing 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 providing conceptual clarifications, empirical innovations, and comparative insights.

Chapter 2: Autoups: Conceptual Clarification and Dataset Introduction

Despite the rising prevalence of autoups, particularly in the post-Cold War era, their systematic study remains underdeveloped. The existing literature suffers from conceptual fragmentation, marked by a proliferation of overlapping and inconsistently defined terms (e.g., ‘self-coup’, ‘autogolpe’, ‘executive aggrandisement’) ([Marsteintredet and Malamud 2019](#); [Baturu and Tolstrup 2022](#)). This conceptual ambiguity hinders empirical analysis, as many datasets fail to distinguish between tenure extension and other forms of executive power consolidation—a critical distinction for this study. Consequently, methodological progress has been limited, with most research relying on qualitative case studies ([Maxwell A. Cameron 1998b](#); [Antonio 2021](#); [Pion-Berlin, Bruneau, and Goetze 2022](#)) rather than quantitative analyses.

This chapter addresses these shortcomings by proposing a precise and theoretically grounded definition of the autocoup, centred on attempts by incumbents to extend their constitutionally mandated terms of office through extra-constitutional means. By focusing on tenure extension, the definition excludes broader forms of executive aggrandisement that occur within existing constitutional timeframes, aligning autocoups conceptually with traditional coups, both of which disrupt constitutionally prescribed leadership succession. Building on this definition, the chapter introduces a significant empirical contribution: an original global dataset of autocoups from 1945 to 2023, documenting 83 distinct events, of which 64 were successful. This dataset enables systematic quantitative analysis and opens new avenues for comparative research on irregular power retention.

Chapter 3: Power Dynamics and Autocoup Attempts

Due to long-standing conceptual and empirical constraints, prior discussion of autocoups have predominantly relied on case-based approaches ([Baturu and Elgie 2019](#); [Marsteintredet and Malamud 2019](#); [Baturu and Tolstrup 2022](#)). The dataset introduced in Chapter 2 facilitates, for the first time, a broad empirical study of the structural conditions underpinning autocoup attempts.

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

This chapter argues that the risk of autocoups is fundamentally shaped by the structural balance of power established at a regime’s inception. Specifically, the likelihood of an autocoup

is determined by the equilibrium between incumbents and potential institutional challengers (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014). Using regime typologies as proxies for internal power structures, the analysis employs both a standard logit model and a bias-reduced logit model (Firth's penalised maximum likelihood estimation). The results demonstrate that presidential democracies and personalist regimes are significantly more prone to autocoup attempts than dominant-party regimes, when controlling for other variables. By contrast, leaders in dominant-party and military regimes exhibit no significant difference in their likelihood of attempting an autocoup. These findings highlight the critical role of regime type in shaping elite incentives for irregular tenure extension.

Chapter 4: Power Acquisition and Leadership Survival

Although extensive research has examined the tenure survival of leaders who assume power through coups (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Sudduth 2017; Easton and Siverson 2018), the lack of comparable data on autocoups has precluded systematic comparisons among regular-entry leaders, coup-installed leaders, and autocoup leaders. This chapter addresses this gap by conducting the first comparative survival analysis of these three categories within a unified theoretical framework.

It posits that coup-installed leaders typically face heightened legitimacy deficits, political uncertainty, and institutional instability, whereas autocoup leaders benefit from institutional continuity while dismantling key constraints. These differing conditions shape distinct pathways to political consolidation. Notably, the time-dependent Cox model reveals no statistically significant difference in survival risk among regular-entry, coup-installed, and autocoup leaders once relevant covariates—particularly regime type—are accounted for. Instead, regime characteristics exert a decisive influence on leadership tenure: leaders in military and personalist regimes face significantly higher risks of removal compared to those in dominant-party regimes.

Chapter 5: Coups, autocoups, and democracy

While the impact of coups on democratisation has been widely studied ([Clayton and Onwumechili 2000](#); [J. Powell 2014](#); [C. Thyne and Hitch 2020](#)), the consequences of autocoups remain underexplored due to the historical absence of relevant data. This chapter addresses this gap through a quantitative analysis of how coups and autocoups affect democratic institutions.

Whereas coups often result in leadership turnover or regime change, autocoups typically involve incumbents dismantling institutional constraints without altering the core ruling coalition. Consequently, their effects are best assessed through continuous measures of democratic quality, such as Polity V scores, rather than binary regime-type transitions. The chapter argues that autocoups lead to consistent declines in Polity V scores, while coups produce more complex impacts. Empirical analysis using a country-fixed effects model confirms that autocoups are associated with sustained reductions in Polity V scores both immediately following the event and over a two-year period. In contrast, coups cause an initial decline in Polity V scores but often exhibit a “U-shaped” recovery within two years. These findings underscore the uniquely insidious nature of autocoups, which frequently proceed incrementally under a legalistic façade.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and future research directions

The concluding chapter synthesises the findings of the preceding chapters, highlighting the structural, strategic, and institutional dynamics that underpin irregular leadership transitions. It argues that coups and autocoups are not merely 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, including further exploration of the nuances of executive power expansion and the development of more sensitive

measures to detect incremental regime changes.

Chapter 2

Autocoups: Conceptual Clarification and Dataset Introduction

Abstract

This chapter proposes a refined conceptualisation of autocoups, defined as instances where incumbent leaders extend their constitutionally mandated tenure through extra-constitutional means, typically by circumventing or breaching 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, establishing tenure extension as its defining feature. In distinguishing autocoups from broader and more ambiguous forms of executive aggrandisement, it advances a more analytically precise framework for examining irregular power extensions. Building on this conceptual foundation, the chapter introduces an original global dataset of autocoup events from 1945 to 2023, documenting 83 distinct cases, of which 64 were successful. This empirical contribution facilitates systematic, large-N analysis of an increasingly prevalent mode of authoritarian consolidation.

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

2.1 Introduction

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

Although many leadership transitions occur smoothly, a significant proportion do not. Authoritarian regimes and fragile democracies, in particular, frequently experience two primary forms of irregular leadership outcomes: the premature removal of incumbents and the extension of power beyond constitutional limits.

The former—forced removals of leaders before the completion of their terms—has been extensively studied within the broader category of irregular leadership transitions. These events have profound implications for regime stability, democratic legitimacy, and institutional development, making their causes and consequences a central concern in political science.

The existing literature identifies a range of precipitating factors, including civil wars (Kokkonen and Sundell 2019), international conflicts (Mesquita and Siverson 1995), ethnic cleavages (Londregan, Bienen, and Walle 1995), economic crises (M. K. Miller 2012; Krishnarajan 2019), and natural disasters (Quiroz Flores and Smith 2012). Among these, coups d'état—defined as illegal and overt attempts by military or state elites to depose a sitting executive (Powell and Thyne 2011)—are the most frequent and consequential source of leadership change. In autocratic contexts, coups account for approximately one-third of all leader exits, surpassing regular transitions (Frantz and Stein 2016), with roughly two-thirds of non-constitutional removals in dictatorships attributable to coups (Svolik 2009). Consequently, coups have attracted significant scholarly attention, with researchers exploring their structural determinants, proximate triggers, aftermath, and impacts on democratic consolidation and economic development (Thyne and Powell 2019).

However, this focus on traditional coups risks overshadowing a distinct and increasingly

prevalent form of irregular transition: the autocoup. In this chapter, an autocoup is defined the extension of an incumbent leader's tenure in office beyond the originally mandated limit, achieved through extra-constitutional means. Despite their growing incidence, particularly since the end of the Cold War, autocoups remain under-theorised and under-examined. Conceptual fragmentation, marked by a proliferation of overlapping and inconsistently applied terms such as 'self-coup', 'autogolpe', and 'executive aggrandisement' ([Marsteintredet and Malamud 2019](#); [Baturu and Tolstrup 2022](#)), has impeded progress. This lack of definitional clarity complicates data collection and comparative analysis, as existing datasets often conflate tenure extensions with broader forms of executive power consolidation, failing to isolate the specific mechanisms this study seeks to examine ([Baturu and Tolstrup 2022](#)). As a result, scholarship has largely relied on qualitative case studies ([Maxwell A. Cameron 1998b](#); [Antonio 2021](#); [Pion-Berlin, Bruneau, and Goetze 2022](#)), limiting opportunities for broader generalisation.

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

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

Secondly, while both disrupt established succession norms, they operate in opposing directions relative to the incumbent: coups prematurely terminate leadership, whereas autocoups extend it beyond constitutional limits. This contrast provides a valuable lens for exploring the mechanisms of political survival and authoritarian consolidation.

Thirdly, a comparative framework illuminates pressing contemporary questions, such as how the marked decline in coup frequency since the 1990s ([Bermeo 2016](#)) can be reconciled with the sustained erosion of democratic governance, now in its eighteenth consecutive year

(Freedom House 2024). By incorporating autocoups into the analytical framework, this study highlights the growing significance of incremental, procedural subversions of democracy, often orchestrated within existing legal and institutional structures.

To address these gaps, the chapter makes two primary contributions. Firstly, it provides 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. Secondly, it introduces an original global dataset of autocoup events from 1945 to 2023, compiled in accordance with this re-conceptualised framework, 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 is the insufficient integration of research on conventional coups and autocoups. Although both represent critical mechanisms of extra-constitutional power transfer, they have typically been examined in isolation, with limited attention to their conceptual and empirical intersections.

This disjunction stems primarily from two factors: the historical under-recognition of autocoups as a distinct subtype of irregular transition and the persistent conceptual ambiguity surrounding their definition. While conventional coups are generally characterised by the abrupt removal of incumbents, autocoups involve incumbent-led efforts to retain or extend power by

circumventing constitutional constraints. However, the inconsistent use of overlapping terms—such as ‘self-coup’, ‘autogolpe’, and ‘executive aggrandisement’—has obscured these distinctions.

Clarifying the definition of autocoops is thus essential for constructing a comparative framework capable of encompassing the full spectrum of irregular power transitions. This section undertakes this task by distinguishing autocoops from broader forms of executive power consolidation and conceptually aligning them with traditional coups through their shared violation of constitutional norms.

Terminology

The academic literature concerning autocoops utilises a diverse array of terms to describe the extension of power or tenure by incumbent leaders. The most prevalent is ‘self-coup’, or its Spanish equivalent ‘autogolpe’ (Przeworski et al. 2000; Maxwell A. Cameron 1998a; Bermeo 2016; Helmke 2017; Marsteintredet and Malamud 2019). This term gained prominence following the actions of Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori in 1992, which involved dissolving Congress, suspending the constitution, and ruling by decree (Mauceri 1995; Maxwell A. Cameron 1998b). However, as Marsteintredet and Malamud (2019) observes, ‘self-coup’ is potentially misleading, as it implies the leader is acting against themselves, whereas such actions typically target other state institutions or constitutional constraints.

A second category of terminology encompasses terms such as ‘presidential coup’, ‘executive coup’, ‘constitutional coup’, ‘electoral coup’, ‘judicial coup’, ‘slow-motion coup’, ‘soft coup’, and ‘parliamentary coup’ (Marsteintredet and Malamud 2019). Whilst these descriptors may highlight specific mechanisms or contexts, their proliferation often engenders conceptual confusion. Many focus on the method of power acquisition but neglect to consistently identify the perpetrator. Moreover, such mechanisms—judicial rulings, legislative manoeuvres, or administrative decrees—may be employed either by or against executive actors, thereby 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” (Baturu and Tolstrup 2022, 374), building upon 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 clarify the actor (the incumbent) and the action (power consolidation or term extension) but frequently fail to convey the illegality or unconstitutionality of such actions. Unlike ‘coup’, which inherently implies an unlawful seizure of power, labels like ‘takeover’ or ‘overstay’ may inadvertently diminish the normative severity of these events.

Given that many extant terms prioritise procedural mechanisms over normative considerations, or conflate legal and extra-legal practices, this study proposes ‘autocoup’ as the most precise and analytically coherent term. This term offers several key advantages:

Definitional clarity and focus on 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 broader, more diffuse instances of executive aggrandisement.

Emphasis on severity and normative implications: The suffix ‘-coup’ underscores the significant breach of constitutional order inherent in such actions. In both academic and policy contexts, the disruption and impact of autocoups are often comparable to, or may exceed, those of conventional coups, thus lending the term appropriate normative and critical weight.

Accurate identification of the perpetrator: The prefix ‘auto-’ explicitly identifies the incumbent leader as the instigator, in contrast to conventional coups, which are typically orchestrated by external actors, such as the military or opposition factions, thereby ensuring precise attribution.

Promotion of conceptual coherence and comparative analysis: Sharing an etymological

root with ‘coup’, ‘autocoup’ maintains an intrinsic conceptual link, ensuring logical consistency. This facilitates systematic comparative analysis of distinct yet related forms of irregular leadership transition within a unified analytical framework.

In summary, ‘autocoup’ precisely identifies both the actor and the act, clearly conveys the illegitimacy and gravity of the behaviour, and establishes its theoretical connections to conventional coups. It thus serves as the most accurate and analytically robust term for capturing and analysing this phenomenon, aligning seamlessly with the unified analytical framework this study seeks to establish.

Definition

Whilst precise terminology is crucial, a significant challenge in defining autocoups resides in identifying their primary characteristic: is it the expansion of power, the extension of tenure, or both? This ambiguity stems from the varied and often overlapping definitions prevalent within political science literature.

The concepts of power expansion and tenure extension are frequently conflated or employed interchangeably, leading to conceptual confusion. To enhance clarity, it is essential to distinguish these phenomena rigorously. Power expansion pertains to an incumbent accruing authority beyond their original constitutional remit, typically through centralisation, the weakening of institutional checks and balances, or encroachment upon other branches of the state, such as the legislature or judiciary. Tenure extension, by contrast, involves efforts by a leader to remain in office beyond the originally prescribed term, often through constitutional amendments, manipulation of elections, or other mechanisms designed to bypass term limits.

Many existing definitions of autocoups conflate these dynamics or overemphasise 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” (Baturu and Tolstrup 2022, 374), builds upon earlier work by Svolik (2014) and likewise centres on power expansion. However, the dataset employing this definition encompasses both power expansion and tenure extension. Conversely, 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 should be regarded as the primary and defining characteristic of an autocoup, for several reasons. Firstly, this focus aligns autcoups 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 whilst 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.

Secondly, in practice, power expansion often functions as a strategic means to facilitate 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 his 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 remain

in office beyond their allotted term; such actions merely strengthen their successors, whose interests may diverge from their own.

Thirdly, 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. Whilst the complexity of measurement should not 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, whilst acknowledging that power expansion may coexist. Firstly, 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, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009) to determine whether an incumbent has effectively remained in power.

Secondly, 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.

Thirdly, autocalps 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 (Baturu and Elgie 2019). 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 autocalp. However, should they subsequently refuse to concede defeat and remain in power beyond their lawful mandate, such conduct would indeed constitute an autocalp.

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

2.3 Introduction to the autocalp dataset

Defining the scope

Classifying political events as autocalps 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 autocalps. 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 autcoups

In categorising autcoups, 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 autcoups 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 autocrats 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 autocrat. 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 autocrat.

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 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 ([Baturu 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 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

Table 2.1: Main Data Sources for Coding the Autocoup Dataset

Dataset	Authors	Coverage	Observations
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

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 autocalps, 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 autocalps between 1945 and 2023, spanning 63 countries. This comprehensive dataset provides a robust empirical foundation for 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

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

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 strate-

gies 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 successor. 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 refrained 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](#); [Baturu 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) ([Baturu 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 2018](#); [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 presents a comprehensive analysis of autocrats, examining political instances where incumbent leaders extend their tenure beyond constitutionally mandated limits. By refining existing definitions and distinguishing autocrats from related concepts—such as self-coups, autogolpes, and executive takeovers—this study introduces an original dataset that catalogues 83 cases of autocrats from 1945 to 2023, of which 64 were successful. The revised conceptual framework, in conjunction with the newly assembled dataset, facilitates a more expansive and systematic analysis of irregular leadership transitions. Whereas traditional scholarship has primarily focused on the premature termination of leadership through coups, this study broadens the analytical scope to encompass irregular tenure extensions. This approach provides a more nuanced understanding of the methods by which incumbents may subvert constitutional norms and democratic procedures to consolidate their authority.

Nevertheless, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the proposed definition of an autocrat requires further scholarly scrutiny and debate to 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. Secondly, while this thesis focuses on tenure extensions, instances involving the expansion of executive power without a formal extension of tenure also merit 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 offers a valuable empirical foundation for future inquiries into the mechanisms and motivations underpinning autocrats. Several promising avenues for further research emerge. Subsequent studies could utilise the dataset to investigate the long-term institutional consequences of autocrats, including their role in democratic backsliding, authoritarian entrenchment, and the personalisation of executive power. Furthermore, comparative analyses between autocrats and traditional coups may shed light on the evolving strategies employed by incumbents to consolidate author-

ity 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.

Keywords: *Autocoups, Coup, Regime types, Tenure Extension, Authoritarianism*

3.1 Introduction

As outlined in Chapter 2, scholarly engagement with autocalps 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 autocalp attempts. Following the methodological precedent established by empirical studies of classical calps—which have primarily examined the antecedents of calp initiation ([Gassebner, Gutmann, and Voigt 2016](#))—this chapter similarly explores why some incumbent leaders attempt to extend their tenure through autocalps, while others do not.

There are three principal reasons for investigating the determinants of autocalps. First, autocalps 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 calps ([Bermeo 2016](#); [Thyne and Powell 2019](#)). Second, autocalps exert profound effects on political stability and democratic development, often resulting in enduring institutional degradation. Third, identifying the drivers of autocalp attempts is essential for future research into their consequences; without a clear understanding of the conditions under which autocalps occur, efforts to prevent them or mitigate their detrimental effects remain constrained.

Although autocalps differ fundamentally from classical calps—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 calps may be fruitfully adapted to analyse autocalps. However, despite the extensive literature on calp 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 autocalp 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. 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 2020¹)

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 (M. K. 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).

¹CNN. *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 1999).

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-Bédél Bokassa in the Central African Republic (1966–1979) (Geddes 1999).

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 1999).

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 autcoups—even within well-established democracies—due to their centralised executive authority and command over the military.

From this analysis, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3-1: The likelihood of autcoup 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 autcoup is attempted in a given country-year—the study initially employs a logistic regression model to investigate the determinants of autcoup 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 autcoup 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 (com-

monly referred to as Bias-Reduced Logit), as outlined by Firth ([1993](#)).

Data and variables

The primary dataset, which incorporates information on autocalps 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 autocalp attempts.

Dependent variable

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

Autocalp attempt: A binary variable indicating whether an autocalp 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 “acttotal” 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 2005).

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. Thyne and Powell 2014](#); [Derpanopoulos et al. 2016](#); [Dahl and Gleditsch 2023](#)), 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 discussion

This chapter employs logistic regression techniques to examine the structural and contextual factors that influence the probability of autocoup attempts. Given the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable—whether or not an autocoup attempt occurred in a specific country-year—and the rarity of such events (78 out of 9,434 observations) in certain categories, the analysis includes both a standard logit model and a bias-reduced logit model. The latter is particularly well-suited for rare events data, as it corrects for the small-sample bias often encountered with conventional maximum likelihood estimation. Consequently, the interpretation of results prioritises estimates from the bias-reduced model. Odds Ratios (ORs) are reported to facilitate an intuitive understanding of effect sizes.

Table [3.1](#) presents the model estimates. The core hypothesis posits that regime type is a key predictor of autocoup incidence, particularly that personalist regimes and presidential democracies are significantly more prone to such events than dominant-party regimes, which serve as the reference category.

The empirical results provide robust support for this hypothesis. In the bias-reduced model, the odds of an autocoup occurring in a personalist regime are more than twice as high as in a dominant-party regime (OR = 2.08, $p < 0.05$). In presidential democracies, the odds are nearly five times greater (OR = 4.87, $p < 0.01$). To illustrate the magnitude of these effects, I compute

Table 3.1: Determinants of Autocoup Attempts(1945-2018)

Characteristic	Standard Logit					Bias-reduced Logit		
	N	Event N	log(OR) ^I	OR ^I	SE	log(OR) ^I	OR ^I	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	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	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

^I*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

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

predicted probabilities for a prototypical country in the dataset, holding all other covariates at their mean values. In dominant-party regimes, the predicted probability of an autocoup in a given year is approximately 0.99%. In personalist regimes, the probability rises to around 2.0%. In presidential democracies, the likelihood increases further to approximately 4.7%. While these probabilities are low in absolute terms—reflecting the rarity of autocoup events—the relative differences are substantial. Leaders in presidential democracies, for instance, are nearly five times more likely to attempt an autocoup than those in dominant-party systems, holding other factors constant. This underscores the structural vulnerability of executive-centric political systems, particularly when institutional checks on executive power are weak.

Among other regime types, military and parliamentary democracies do not show statistically significant differences in autocoup likelihood relative to dominant-party regimes. The residual “other” category does reach marginal significance (OR = 0.34, $p < 0.1$), suggesting lower odds, although the heterogeneity within this group warrants cautious interpretation.

Turning to the control variables, several findings warrant closer attention. The Polity V

score, which proxies the level of democratic institutionalisation, is significantly associated with reduced odds of autocoup ($OR = 0.91, p < 0.01$). Substantively, this indicates that for each one-point increase in Polity score, the odds of an autocoup decrease by approximately 9%, holding other factors constant. This underscores the protective role of democratic institutions against executive overreach.

The Cold War indicator also emerges as significant ($OR = 0.45, p < 0.01$), suggesting that autocoups were 55% less likely during the Cold War era than in the post-Cold War period. This aligns with historical interpretations that view the Cold War as imposing external constraints on authoritarian innovation, often via superpower influence.

The analysis reveals a statistically significant, albeit marginal, negative relationship between the log of population size and the incidence of autocoups ($OR = 0.86, p < 0.1$). This suggests that as a country's population grows, the odds of an autocoup tend to decrease. This finding aligns with theoretical arguments positing that larger, more populous states may exhibit greater organizational complexity and higher visibility of executive power dynamics, thereby increasing the difficulty and scrutiny associated with an executive power grab.

Conversely, indicators of economic performance—including GDP per capita, GDP growth, and political violence—do not exhibit statistically significant relationships with the outcome variable. Likewise, the log of days in office for the incumbent does not significantly predict autocoup attempts, suggesting that tenure alone is not a sufficient condition for extra-constitutional moves.

In sum, the analysis confirms that regime type—particularly personalist and presidential systems—is a critical structural condition influencing the likelihood of autocoup attempts. The inclusion of predicted probabilities and percentage changes in odds ratios serves to clarify the substantive significance of these patterns, beyond their statistical robustness. These results point to the institutional fragility of regimes where executive authority is highly centralised and unchecked. Additionally, the protective effects of democratic institutions and Cold War-era international structures warrant greater attention in discussion of executive stability and regime

resilience. The implications of these findings for policy and democratic governance will be explored in detail in the final chapter.

3.5 Summary

This chapter provides a quantitative analysis of the determinants of autocoup attempts, addressing a notable gap in the existing literature, which has often been hindered by conceptual imprecision and the absence of systematic empirical data. It advances the central argument that the likelihood of autocoup attempts is shaped significantly by the structural configuration of political power within regimes, operationalised through regime type. Employing both standard logistic regression and Firth's bias-reduced logit model, the analysis demonstrates that personalist autocracies and presidential democracies are markedly more susceptible 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 nearly five times higher in presidential democracies relative to the baseline category.

These findings lend empirical support to the hypothesis that such regime types possess structural vulnerabilities that facilitate extra-constitutional power consolidation by incumbents. In addition to regime type, the analysis identifies several other statistically significant covariates: population size, the degree of democratic institutionalisation, and the broader historical context of the Cold War all exert discernible effects on the probability of autocoup occurrence. By examining the strategic incentives confronting incumbent leaders across diverse institutional contexts, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of irregular leadership transitions.

Nevertheless, the analysis also underscores several conceptual and methodological challenges that warrant further investigation. Unlike traditional coups—which may occur at various stages of a regime's lifespan and are often subject to recurrence—autocoups appear to follow distinct temporal patterns. For instance, their likelihood may be comparatively low dur-

ing the initial stages of a leader's tenure, increasing as the conclusion of a constitutional term approaches. Moreover, while a successful extension of tenure may reduce the short-term risk of subsequent attempts, empirical cases such as those of Presidents Putin and Lukashenko suggest that incumbents may engage in serial autocoup behaviour.

To render the analysis tractable, this study adopts the simplifying assumption that an autocoup attempt occurs only once per leadership tenure. While analytically expedient, this assumption highlights the need for future research to explore the temporal dynamics and sequencing of autocoup activity. Such inquiries would usefully complement the present findings by offering deeper insights into the long-term patterns of institutional adaptation, authoritarian durability, and democratic erosion.

Chapter 4

Power Acquisition and Leadership Survival

Abstract

This chapter examines the effect of power acquisition methods on the tenure of political leaders, focusing in particular on those who attain office through regular means, traditional coups, and those who subsequently extend their power via autocoup. It was initially hypothesised that leaders who entrench their authority through autocoups would exhibit greater longevity in office than those installed through coups alone. However, this proposition is not substantiated by the empirical evidence. A time-dependent Cox proportional hazards model reveals no statistically significant difference in the risk of removal between coup-installed and autocoup leaders, once key covariates—most notably regime type—are controlled for.

Instead, the analysis highlights the pivotal role of regime characteristics in determining leadership survival. Leaders operating within military or personal regimes are shown to face significantly higher hazards of removal relative to those in dominant-party systems. Additionally, higher levels of GDP per capita are positively associated with leadership stability, whilst elevated levels of political violence are linked to increased risks of removal.

These findings suggest that structural and institutional contexts exert a more profound influence on the durability of irregular leadership than the specific modality of power acquisition. This study contributes to the literature on political survival by emphasising the salience of regime type and broader political conditions in shaping the tenure of leaders who ascend to power through non-conventional means.

keywords: *Coups, Autocoups, Leadership Survival, Cox Model*

4.1 Introduction

The enduring question of why some political leaders remain in office for decades while others are deposed within months—or even days—has long preoccupied scholars in political science. Although a substantial body of research has addressed leadership longevity, comparatively little attention has been devoted to a distinct subset of leaders: those who extend their tenure through autocoups. Analysing the survival of such leaders is essential for understanding the dynamics underpinning irregular transitions of power and their broader implications for political stability and democratic governance.

Leaders who ascend to office via irregular means—such as coups or autocoups—differ markedly from those who enter through institutionalised, constitutional procedures. The authority and legitimacy of irregular leaders are often contested, rendering them analytically distinct and more complex to study. Data from the Archigos dataset underscore the prevalence of such irregular transitions: between 1945 and 2015, more than half of the leaders who entered power irregularly also exited by irregular means—a rate substantially higher than that observed among leaders who entered office through regular procedures ([Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009](#)).

Coup-installed and autocoup leaders constitute a significant share of these irregular cases. According to Archigos, 246 out of 374 leaders (65.8%) who exited power irregularly were removed via coups ([Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009](#)). Further, research by Frantz and Stein ([2016](#)) indicates that coups account for approximately one-third of all exits in autocracies, marking them as the most frequent mode of leadership transition in such regimes. Complementing this, the original dataset on autocoups introduced in Chapter 2 records 83 autocoup attempts between 1945 and 2023, of which 64 were successful. This provides a foundation for empirical analysis of post-event survival among autocoup leaders.

Assessing the tenure of leaders who come to power through coups or autocoups presents notable methodological challenges, owing to the volatility and unpredictability that characterise

these irregular modes of accession. Nonetheless, comparative evidence—excluding leaders who remained in office for fewer than 180 days—suggests that those who extend their rule via autocrats tend to enjoy longer average post-event tenures (approximately 9.4 years) than those who originally enter through coups (approximately 6.6 years), indicating a potential tenure gap of around 3 years.

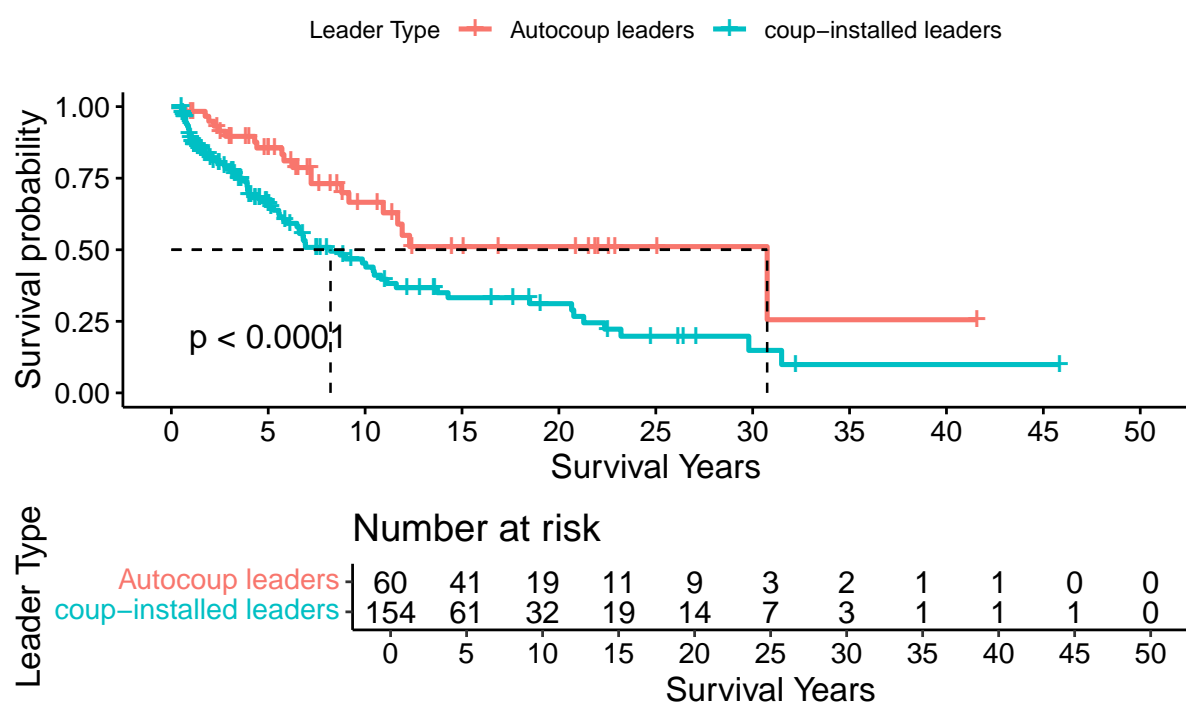


Figure 4.1: Survival Curves of Autocoup and Coup-installed Leaders

Preliminary survival analysis, as illustrated by the log-rank test in Figure 4.1, reveals a statistically significant difference in tenure length between coup-installed and autocoup leaders. The survival curve for autocoup leaders consistently lies above that for 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 plays a significant role in determining leadership survival. Leaders installed through coups may confront greater resistance or experience heightened institutional fragility, thereby contributing to shorter average tenures. Employing Cox proportional hazards and time-dependent Cox models, the analysis supports

this hypothesis by showing that autocoup leaders tend to remain in office longer than their coup-installed counterparts.

This research makes two principal contributions to the literature on political survival. First, it introduces the mode of accession to power as a previously under-explored explanatory factor. Second, through the application of survival models, it provides robust empirical evidence of the significant disparities in tenure between autocoup and coup-installed leaders. These findings may help explain the increasing prevalence of autocoup-driven tenure extensions since the early 2000s, as incumbents observe and emulate the apparent success of prior cases.

The remainder of this chapter is organised as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on political survival, establishing the theoretical framework for the analysis. Section 3 explores the key factors that influence the tenure of coup-installed and autocoup leaders. Section 4 outlines the methodological approach and data sources, with particular emphasis on survival analysis techniques. Section 5 presents the empirical findings and discusses their implications. Finally, Section 6 offers concluding reflections and considers the broader significance 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-

nunity. 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 autocalps are more likely to enjoy longer extended tenures than those who assume office through calps.

This hypothesis encapsulates the anticipated effects of the differing challenges and advantages faced by calp-installed and autocalp 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 autocalp leaders exhibit longer survival times in office than calp-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 calp-installed and autocalp 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 = Non-coup leader:** A leader who assumes power through regular means.
- **Group B = Autocoup leader:** An incumbent who extends their tenure through extra-constitutional means.
- **Group C = 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. Among these are regime type—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, which captures the extent of civil conflict, repression, or unrest that can threaten regime stability and leadership tenure; population size, to control for structural differences across states that may impact political dynamics; and Polity V scores, which reflect the institutional characteristics and the 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 [/]	SE	N	Event N	HR [/]	SE
Leader Type								
Non-coup leaders	1,506	195	1.00	—	8,039	196	1.00	—
Autocoup leaders	58	20	1.21	0.247	507	20	1.22	0.244
Coup-installed leaders	152	75	1.77***	0.155	998	75	1.26	0.170
Regime Types								
Dominant-party	267	68	1.00	—	2,610	63	1.00	—
Military	138	51	2.64***	0.194	656	60	3.17***	0.213
Personal	137	61	1.70***	0.181	1,551	82	1.78***	0.175
Presidential	346	42	1.42	0.229	1,819	39	1.31	0.269
Parliamentary	711	35	1.29	0.245	2,555	31	1.28	0.292
Other	117	33	2.27***	0.226	353	16	2.10**	0.302
GDP Growth Trend	1,716	290	0.62	0.984	9,544	291	0.13***	0.782
GDP per capita	1,716	290	0.96***	0.008	9,544	291	0.96***	0.007
Population: log	1,716	290	0.99	0.043	9,544	291	0.96	0.044
Polity V score	1,716	290	0.98*	0.013	9,544	291	0.99	0.015
Political violence	1,716	290	0.98	0.030	9,544	291	1.06**	0.027

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

Abbreviations: HR = Hazard Ratio, SE = Standard Error

4.5 Results and discussion

Model results

Regression estimates from both the Cox Proportional Hazards (PH) model and the time-dependent Cox model—calculated using the survival package in R (Therneau 2024)—are presented in Table 4.2. These two model specifications produce divergent findings with respect to the central question of this study: whether the method of power acquisition significantly affects the survival prospects of political leaders.

The Cox PH model identifies a statistically significant difference in the hazard of removal between coup-installed and non-coup leaders. Specifically, coup-installed leaders face a hazard ratio of 1.77 relative to non-coup leaders ($p < 0.01$), suggesting they are significantly more likely to be ousted. In contrast, autocoup leaders exhibit a hazard ratio of 1.21, which does not reach statistical significance. However, the time-dependent Cox model—which accounts for time-

varying covariates such as economic performance and political violence—does not reveal any statistically significant difference in removal risk between leader types. The hazard ratios for both autoup (1.22) and coup-installed (1.26) leaders are statistically indistinguishable from unity when compared to the non-coup baseline. This is also true when take the coup-installed leaders as the reference, which shows no significant difference among these three groups of leaders.

Given the superior robustness of the time-dependent model in accounting for evolving political and economic conditions, the principal interpretation of the findings rests on this specification. Contrary to the initial hypothesis, and despite preliminary evidence from simpler models, the manner in which power is acquired—whether through a coup or autoup—does not independently predict leader survival once key contextual variables are incorporated.

Instead, regime type emerges as the most significant predictor of leadership survival. Leaders in military regimes exhibit a hazard ratio of 3.17 ($p < 0.01$), indicating a 217% higher risk of removal compared to leaders in dominant-party regimes. Similarly, leaders in personalist regimes ($HR = 1.78$, $p < 0.01$) and in regimes classified as “Other” ($HR = 2.10$, $p < 0.05$)—including transitional or provisional arrangements—are also significantly more vulnerable. These results suggest that institutional fragility, factionalism, and weak legitimacy associated with such regime types substantially increase the likelihood of leadership turnover.

Economic conditions also play a noteworthy role. GDP per capita exhibits a negative and statistically significant relationship with leader removal ($HR = 0.96$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that greater economic development corresponds with increased political stability. In practical terms, each additional \$10,000 in GDP per capita reduces the hazard of removal by approximately 4%, all else equal. Furthermore, GDP growth trends are strongly associated with survival ($HR = 0.13$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that sustained economic performance significantly enhances leader durability, each 1 point increase of GDP growth (1% GDP growth over the average growth rate for the previous 5 years) reduces the hazard of removal by approximately 87%, all else equal.

Conversely, political violence emerges as a destabilising force. A one-unit increase in the

political violence index raises the hazard of removal by approximately 6% ($HR = 1.06$, $p < 0.05$), underscoring the impact of societal unrest and conflict on the sustainability of political leadership.

Other variables, such as population size (log-transformed) and Polity V scores, do not attain statistical significance in the time-dependent model. While these measures are often cited as important predictors of regime stability and institutional quality, their limited explanatory power in this context implies that more proximate factors—such as regime structure and active conflict—play a more immediate role in shaping survival outcomes following irregular accessions to power.

It is important to highlight that these results are conditional upon the exclusion of leaders who remained in office for fewer than 180 days after their initial seizure of power. This exclusion is analytically justified, given that many such short-lived leaders—particularly those emerging from failed coups—do not manage to consolidate authority and are therefore ill-suited for meaningful survival analysis. Including these cases could artificially inflate the hazard ratios for coup-installed leaders, thereby skewing the results.

In sum, this study finds limited support for the hypothesis that autocoup leaders enjoy greater tenure than their coup-installed counterparts. Instead, it confirms that broader structural and institutional conditions—especially regime type and socio-economic context—are the primary determinants of leadership survival following irregular accessions to power.

Discussion

Figure 4.2 presents the hazard ratios (HRs) and their corresponding 95% confidence intervals for the covariates included in the Cox Proportional Hazards (PH) model (left panel) and the time-dependent Cox model (right panel). Each dot represents the estimated hazard ratio, while the horizontal lines denote the 95% confidence intervals. A hazard ratio of 1 indicates no effect on the probability of removal from office. Variables whose confidence intervals cross the vertical

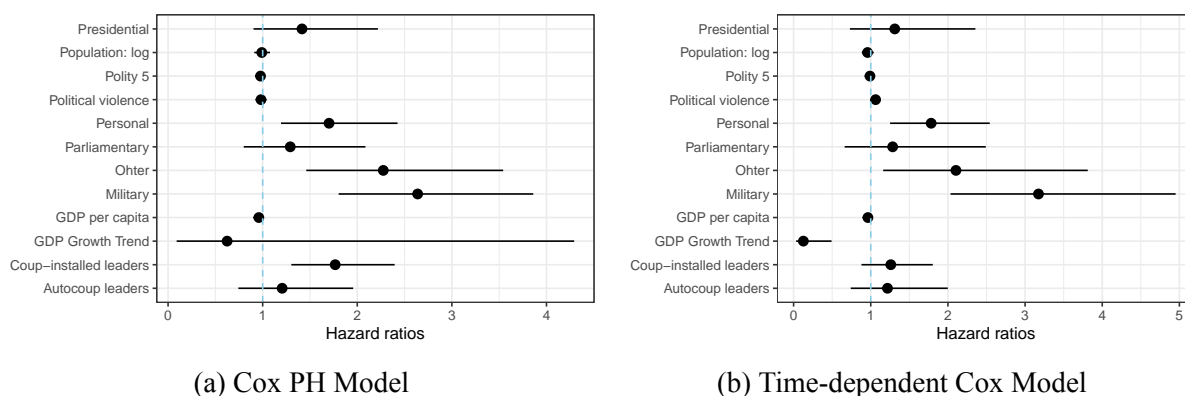


Figure 4.2: Hazard Ratios and 95% CIs for Leader Ousting

dashed blue line at 1 are not statistically significant at the 5% level. Given its ability to account for time-varying covariates and evolving structural conditions, the time-dependent Cox model provides the principal basis for interpretation.

While the effect of leadership type varies across models, the time-dependent Cox model—on which the principal interpretation is based—shows that neither coup-installed nor autocoup leaders have a statistically significant impact on survival tenure. In this specification, the confidence intervals for both categories cross the reference line, indicating that once relevant covariates are controlled for, the mode of accession does not independently influence the hazard of removal.

In contrast, regime type emerges as a robust determinant of political survival. Leaders operating within military regimes, personalist regimes, and those classified under “Other” regime types (typically transitional or provisional governments) face markedly elevated hazards of removal. The hazard ratios for these categories are significantly greater than 1 and attain statistical significance at the 5% level, signalling a consistently heightened vulnerability. This aligns with the broader theoretical contention that regime institutionalisation and coherence are central to leadership stability.

Conversely, the effects associated with more democratic regime types—parliamentary and presidential systems—while positive, do not reach statistical significance. Their confidence

intervals intersect the reference line, suggesting that, under conditions of irregular accession, the institutional architecture of democratic regimes may not offer immediate protective advantages to incumbents.

Economic performance plays a meaningful role. GDP growth exhibits a pronounced and statistically significant negative effect on the hazard of removal. The associated hazard ratio is considerably below 1 and lies far from the reference line, suggesting that improved economic performance substantially reduces the likelihood of political removal. GDP per capita is also statistically significant, though its hazard ratio is very close to 1, implying only a modest substantive effect. These findings reinforce the well-established association between economic stability and political survival.

Political violence also shows a statistically significant effect, but with a hazard ratio close to 1, indicating that while it increases the risk of removal, its magnitude is limited. Similarly, other control variables such as population size (logged) and Polity V scores fail to achieve statistical significance. Their estimated hazard ratios are near 1 and their confidence intervals encompass the reference line. This suggests that these structural and institutional indicators, though theoretically important, exert minimal influence on short- to medium-term leadership survival in the context of irregular accession.

These findings collectively reinforce the argument that, in the aftermath of irregular leadership transitions, regime context and dynamic political-economic conditions are more consequential for tenure than the specific mode of accession. While the method of taking power—coup versus autocoup—may matter symbolically or normatively, it is the surrounding regime environment and its capacity to manage threats, maintain coherence, and deliver stability that ultimately determine political longevity.

Assessing the proportional hazards assumption

Evaluating the proportional hazards assumption is a critical step in validating the reliability of estimates produced by the Cox regression models. This assumption was tested using a chi-squared test based on Schoenfeld residuals, which assesses whether the effect of each covariate remains constant over time. The test results indicate that the assumption is not violated in either the standard Cox Proportional Hazards (PH) model or the time-dependent Cox model. The global p-values—0.12 for the standard model and 0.23 for the time-dependent model—both exceed the conventional 5% significance threshold, thereby confirming that the proportional hazards assumption is satisfied in both cases.

4.6 Summary

This chapter has explored the survival prospects of political leaders who assumed office through irregular means—specifically via coups and autocoups—using survival analysis techniques, including the Cox Proportional Hazards model and a time-dependent Cox model. While the standard Cox model identified a statistically significant difference in removal risk between coup-installed and non-coup leaders, this effect was not sustained in the more rigorous time-dependent model. Once time-varying covariates were accounted for, the mode of power acquisition—whether through a coup or an autocoup—did not independently predict leadership duration.

The principal findings suggest that leadership type is not a significant determinant of political survival when contextual variables such as regime type, economic performance, and political violence are considered. In particular, regime type consistently emerges as the most influential factor. Leaders in military, personalist, and transitional (“other”) regimes face significantly higher hazards of removal than those in dominant-party systems, highlighting the institutional instability and vulnerability associated with less consolidated political structures.

Economic development also plays an important role. Higher levels of GDP per capita are associated with greater leadership stability, while GDP growth exerts an especially strong effect: even modest increases in growth rates substantially reduce the risk of removal. Conversely, political violence increases the likelihood of ousting, underscoring the destabilising impact of unrest and conflict on leader survival.

Other structural variables, such as population size and Polity V scores, do not attain statistical significance in the time-dependent model. Their limited effect in this context suggests that under conditions of irregular accession, proximate and dynamic factors—particularly those relating to regime structure and economic performance—are more consequential than long-term institutional attributes.

Methodologically, this chapter illustrates the analytical value of time-dependent survival models in capturing the effects of evolving covariates. Substantively, it provides one of the first systematic empirical investigations into the survival of autocoup leaders, contributing to the growing literature on irregular leadership transitions. While the newly constructed autocoup dataset represents a valuable innovation, its limitations point to the need for further refinement and expansion in future research.

In sum, this chapter finds that regime characteristics and economic dynamics, rather than the mode of accession, are the principal determinants of political survival following irregular transitions to power. These findings contribute to broader debates on authoritarian resilience, executive instability, and the structural foundations of political longevity.

Chapter 5

Coups, Autocoups, and Democracy

Abstract

This chapter investigates the impact of autocoups on political institutions, comparing them with traditional coups through an analysis of variations in Polity V scores. It advances two primary hypotheses: first, that incumbent leaders frequently consolidate power by systematically undermining institutional constraints in the period leading up to an autocoup, resulting in a decline in Polity V scores attributable to the autocoup. Second, unlike traditional coups, which exhibit a “U-shaped” trajectory in Polity V scores, autocoups precipitate a persistent decline in these scores without subsequent recovery. This is attributed to autocoup leaders’ deliberate intent to suppress opposition and dismantle institutional checks and balances to secure prolonged tenure.

Employing a country-fixed effects model, this study demonstrates that Polity V scores typically decline following autocoups, mirroring the magnitude of decline observed after traditional coups. However, while traditional coups often lead to an immediate reduction in Polity V scores followed by conditions conducive to recovery over time, autocoups result in sustained democratic erosion. These findings highlight the divergent political trajectories induced by coups and autocoups.

This research addresses a critical gap in the empirical analysis of autocoups and contributes

to academic and policy discussion by elucidating their detrimental effects, particularly in terms of democratic backsliding and the entrenchment of authoritarian governance.

5.1 Introduction

Previous chapters have delineated the concept of an autocoup, introduced a novel dataset documenting such events, conducted empirical analyses of the determinants of autocoup attempts, and compared the post-event survival durations of leaders installed by coups and autocoups. A logical extension of this inquiry is to explore the broader implications of autocoups, particularly their impact on democratisation processes from a political science perspective.

The absence of a comprehensive, widely accepted dataset on autocoups has historically limited discussion of their consequences to primarily case-study-based analyses ([Baturu and Elgie 2019](#); [Baturu and Tolstrup 2022](#)). In contrast, the impact of traditional coups on democratisation has been extensively explored through empirical studies ([J. Powell 2014](#); [C. Thyne and Powell 2014](#); [Derpanopoulos et al. 2016](#); [M. K. Miller 2016](#); [Dahl and Gleditsch 2023](#)). Although debates persist, a significant body of literature suggests that coups may exert a positive effect on democratisation over time.

To move beyond case-specific narratives and achieve a more systematic and comparative understanding, this chapter undertakes the first empirical investigation into the democratic consequences of autocoups. Its primary objective is to determine whether autocoups entrench authoritarian rule, facilitate democratisation, or have no substantive impact on regime transitions.

Given the conceptual and empirical parallels between coups and autocoups, a secondary aim is to compare their respective effects on democratisation. While both phenomena disrupt established political orders, their immediate and longer-term consequences may differ markedly. Clarifying these distinctions is essential for assessing their broader political ramifications.

To address these questions, this study utilises an established dataset on coups alongside a newly constructed dataset on autocoups. Employing a fixed-effects model, it evaluates their respective impacts on democratic quality, operationalised through Polity V scores. The findings indicate that both coups and autocoups are associated with an immediate decline in democratic quality. However, while Polity V scores affected by coups typically exhibit notable recovery

within two years, those impacted by autocrats show no such improvement over the same period.

This study makes two principal contributions to political science. First, it provides the first empirical analysis of the impact of autocrats on democratisation, thereby addressing a significant gap in the literature. Second, by comparing the effects of coups and autocrats—and demonstrating the more severe and sustained damage to democratic institutions caused by the latter—it underscores the need to treat autocrats as a distinct political phenomenon warranting greater scholarly and policy attention.

The remainder of this chapter is structured as follows. Section 2 examines the impact of autocrats on democratisation, with particular emphasis on their comparison with traditional coups. Section 3 outlines the research design, methodological approach, and variables employed. Section 4 presents the empirical findings and discusses their broader implications. Section 5 concludes by summarising the key findings and reflecting on their significance for understanding and addressing autocrat dynamics.

5.2 Impact of autocrats on political change

As outlined in Chapter 2, an autocrat refers to a situation in which an incumbent leader extends their tenure beyond constitutionally mandated limits through extra-constitutional means. While the official title or institutional framework may be altered, the individual wielding political power remains the same. In contrast to traditional coups, autocrats do not result in genuine leadership turnover, elite restructuring, or fundamental regime transformation; the core structure of rule persists.

This distinction has important implications. Because regime change seldom follows a successful autocrat, its political effects cannot be adequately captured through conventional analytical frameworks. Most studies on coups and democratisation assess outcomes in terms of regime transitions—from autocracy to democracy or vice versa—as seen in prior research (C.

Thyne and Powell 2014; Derpanopoulos et al. 2016; M. K. Miller 2016). However, such binary frameworks are ill-suited for analysing autocalps, which rarely precipitate formal regime change.

Nevertheless, the absence of regime transition does not imply political continuity or stasis. On the contrary, autocalps frequently reshape political dynamics and can trigger substantial institutional and behavioural changes. Accordingly, a more appropriate approach for assessing their political impact is to examine changes in democracy indices, such as those provided by the Polity5 dataset (Monty G. Marshall and Gurr 2020). The Polity V score, which ranges from -10 (full autocracy) to +10 (full democracy), allows for the identification of incremental shifts in democratic institutions and constraints on executive power, even in the absence of formal regime turnover. This methodological approach is consistent with recent studies (Dahl and Gleditsch 2023).

Although autocalps rarely result in overt regime transformation, their implications for democratisation are considerable. In particular, their negative effects appear to be more severe and enduring than those associated with traditional calps.

Immediate democratic backsliding following autocalps

Unlike calps—which are typically characterised by abrupt disruptions such as the removal of a sitting leader—autocalps often unfold gradually. Incumbents seeking to extend their tenure usually undertake preparatory measures well in advance of the decisive act. These measures may include purging political elites, suppressing opposition parties, repressing protest movements, and restricting media freedoms. In the absence of such groundwork, an autocalp would likely face formidable resistance and may fail. As a result, democratic decline often begins prior to the formal execution of the autocalp, with Polity V scores reflecting deterioration during this preparatory phase.

One frequently cited case is Peru in 1992. President Alberto Fujimori dissolved Congress,

suspended the 1979 Constitution, and ruled by decree until a new constituent assembly was elected to draft a revised constitution (Maxwell A. Cameron 1998b). Although these actions did not immediately secure his continued rule—given the constitutional prohibition on immediate re-election—Fujimori’s constitutional reforms in 1993 enabled him to win a second term in 1995 (Baturu 2019).

Polity V scores illustrate the political consequences of this process. When Fujimori entered office in 1990, Peru’s score stood at 8, where it remained in 1991. Following the 1992 dissolution of Congress, the score plummeted to −4. After the 1993 constitutional revision, the score rose marginally to −1, where it remained throughout the rest of Fujimori’s presidency. This indicates that while there was a partial recovery in institutional ratings, democratic quality never returned to pre-autocoup levels.

A similar trajectory can be observed in Belarus under Alexander Lukashenko. Upon taking office in 1994, Belarus received a Polity V score of 8. However, after Lukashenko bypassed parliamentary opposition through a controversial referendum in 1995, the score fell to 0. Following a second referendum in 1996 that extended his presidential term, the score dropped further to −7, where it has remained ever since, despite additional term extensions (Ash 2014; Baturu and Elgie 2019).

In contrast, traditional coups typically occur without prior access to state institutions, and coup plotters are less able to prepare the ground in advance. However, once in power, they often consolidate authority swiftly by removing or neutralising previous officeholders and political opponents (Pieterse 1982). This may involve dissolving legislatures, suspending constitutions, or ruling by decree or military command (Onwumechili 1998; A. C. Miller 2011). As a result, traditional coups also lead to a decline in Polity V scores, though through more immediate and disruptive mechanisms.

Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5-1: Autocoups will result in a significant decline in Polity V scores immediately following their occurrence, in a manner comparable to the effects observed in traditional coups.

Consistent outcomes of autocoups versus the “U-shaped” effects of coups

Over the longer term, in contrast to the more ambiguous and context-dependent effects of traditional coups ([Dahl and Gleditsch 2023](#)), autocoups seldom contribute to processes of democratisation.

The relationship between coups and democratisation has been extensively examined in the scholarly literature. Some scholars argue that coups—or even the credible threat of them—can act as catalysts for democratic transitions. One line of reasoning suggests that coups may generate a political “shock” that creates openings for liberalisation which would not otherwise emerge ([C. Thyne and Powell 2014](#)). In a critical reassessment, Derpanopoulos et al. ([2016](#)) questioned the assumed democratising potential of coups, prompting further empirical and theoretical engagement, including a notable response by M. K. Miller ([2016](#)). More recently, Dahl and Gleditsch ([2023](#)) has advanced this debate by suggesting that the aftermath of coups can lead to either democratic or authoritarian trajectories, largely depending on the extent and nature of popular mobilisation.

A frequently cited example of a so-called “pro-democracy coup” is that of Niger in February 2010, when the military removed President Mamadou Tandja after he unconstitutionally extended his mandate. The Supreme Council for the Restoration of Democracy (CSRD) assumed power and committed to restoring constitutional rule. Their actions were welcomed both domestically and internationally as a potential step towards democratic consolidation. In 2011, the CSRD fulfilled its pledge by holding competitive elections that brought Mahamadou Issoufou to the presidency ([M. K. Miller 2016](#)).

While scholarly debate continues regarding the long-term democratic outcomes of coups, it is evident that such outcomes are highly variable and context-specific. By contrast, autocoups almost never lead to democratic gains, nor do they yield improvements in political freedoms. This pattern stems from the very nature of autocoups, which by design erode constitutional limits on executive power—most notably term limits.

Term limits serve as critical institutional safeguards against the concentration of political power. In democracies, they promote leadership turnover, accountability, and resistance to authoritarian backsliding. In autocracies, they can function as rare opportunities for elite turnover or peaceful succession. Circumventing term limits, by contrast, typically signals political entrenchment and institutional decay.

As outlined in Chapter 2 (Table 2.2), autocoups are executed through either pseudo-legal mechanisms or overtly unconstitutional acts. These include constitutional amendments removing term limits, the postponement or annulment of elections, manipulation of electoral outcomes, or outright refusal to accept defeat. Although many autocoups are cloaked in a veneer of legality, they fundamentally breach constitutional norms designed to prevent indefinite rule.

As discussed earlier, many incumbents engage in institutional erosion well before formally extending their tenure. Once power has been consolidated through an autocoup, few make efforts to reverse authoritarian measures or reinstate democratic safeguards, even when internal or external pressure eases.

Case studies from Peru and Belarus underscore the consistent pattern of democratic decline associated with autocoups, as evidenced by reductions in Polity V scores. However, it is important to note that the majority of autocoups—approximately two-thirds—occur in regimes that are already authoritarian, where Polity V scores are low to begin with. This mirrors broader findings in the coup literature, which show that coups are also disproportionately concentrated in autocratic contexts.

For example, China’s 2018 constitutional amendment, which removed presidential term limits under Xi Jinping¹, did not lead to a change in its Polity V score, which remained at –7. This reflects a broader trend observed in highly autocratic regimes (Polity V scores below –6), where there is little institutional democracy to erode, and thus limited scope for further decline.

Nevertheless, some autocoups have taken place in relatively more democratic settings. In

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.

these cases, the Polity V score often remained stable, despite the circumvention of term limits. Notable examples include Argentina (1993), Brazil (1997), and Colombia (2004), where presidents amended constitutional provisions to allow re-election, but later voluntarily stepped down. In these cases, Polity V scores remained unchanged (7–8), reflecting that while term limits were relaxed, broader democratic institutions continued to function (Baturu 2019).

Across all documented cases—whether in Peru, Belarus, China, Argentina, Brazil, or Colombia—there is no instance in which a country’s Polity V score increased following an autocoup. Within the dataset introduced in Chapter 3, only four cases—Guinea-Bissau (1988), Burkina Faso (1997), Congo-Brazzaville (2001), and Lebanon (2004)—exhibited minor improvements in Polity V scores, but these changes were marginal and politically insignificant.

In contrast to coup leaders—some of whom justify their actions by invoking democratic ideals, as in Niger’s 2010 case—autocoup leaders rarely, if ever, make such claims. If democratic advancement were truly their objective, they would adhere to constitutional provisions and relinquish power lawfully, rather than dismantling the very constraints designed to limit executive authority.

Based on this analysis, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5-2: Autocoups are associated with significant declines in Polity V scores, typically without subsequent recovery, whereas traditional coups often exhibit a “U-shaped” trajectory, marked by an initial decline followed by a gradual rebound in democratic indicators over time.

5.3 Methodology and variables

Methodology

As outlined above, autocoups are less likely to result in full regime transitions—whether from democracy to autocracy or vice versa. Consequently, evaluating their effects solely in terms of

regime change or shifts across democratic thresholds is analytically inappropriate. Instead, this study assesses political change by examining variations in Polity V scores, which capture more subtle shifts in institutional quality and democratic performance.

To differentiate between immediate and medium-term effects, the analysis considers both event-year and two-year impacts of autocalups. The event-year effect is measured as the change in Polity V score in the year of the autocalup relative to the preceding year:

$$Polity_t - Polity_{t-1}$$

The three-year effect captures the change in Polity V score two years after the event, relative to the year of the autocalup:

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

This three-year specification is intended to capture medium-term political developments, as autocalups typically entrench existing power structures rather than inducing immediate systemic change. Short-term fluctuations may not fully reflect the institutional consequences of such events.

To empirically test the hypotheses, the study employs a linear fixed-effects model at the country level. To distinguish between attempted and successful autocalups, separate models are estimated using binary variables that code for autocalup attempts and successes, respectively.

Variables

The analysis draws upon a global panel of country-year observations spanning from 1950 to 2020, resulting in approximately 9,100 observations. The primary dependent variable is the change in Polity V score, calculated either as a one-year or three-year difference, depending on the model specification. Polity V scores range from -10 (full autocracy) to $+10$ (full democ-

racy). To address missing data caused by transitional codes (−66, −77, −88), these values are replaced with the nearest valid Polity score to preserve temporal continuity and reduce bias associated with listwise deletion.

The primary independent variable is the occurrence of an autocoup, as defined in Chapter 2. The dataset includes 83 attempted and 64 successful autocoups. For models analysing attempted autocoups, the variable is coded as 1 in the year of the attempt and 0 otherwise. In the three-year specification, a decay function is applied to measure the persistence of effects, following the approach of Dahl and Gleditsch (2023). To account for temporal diffusion, a half-life of five years is specified, allowing the model to capture both immediate and delayed consequences from the year of the autocoup (y_t) through to four years post-event (y_{t+4}).

In addition, traditional coups are included as a secondary independent variable for two reasons. First, they enable a comparative evaluation of the political consequences of coups versus autocoups. Second, coups and autocoups may occur in close proximity or in causal sequence, necessitating analytical disaggregation. The coup data are drawn from Powell and Thyne (2011), and are coded in a manner consistent with the autocoup variables—using a binary indicator for one-year effects and a decay function for three-year impacts.

A set of control variables is included to account for alternative explanations. These comprise: economic performance, proxied by GDP growth and GDP per capita; political violence, to capture variations in political stability; and the logarithm of population size, which serves as a proxy for state capacity and scale effects. To mitigate concerns regarding reverse causality, all control variables are lagged by one year, ensuring that their values precede the outcome being measured.

Two additional dummy variables are incorporated:

Non-democracy: This variable captures regime type by distinguishing cases with Polity V scores below −6 (already autocratic and less prone to further decline) and above +6 (institutionally resilient to democratic erosion).

Cold War: A temporal dummy variable to account for the geopolitical context, in line with

previous studies on the relationship between coups and democratisation (C. Thyne and Powell 2014; Derpanopoulos et al. 2016; Dahl and Gleditsch 2023). It captures broad international trends, such as the stagnation or decline in democratic scores during the Cold War (1960s–1990) and the more pronounced democratising trend after 1990.

5.4 Results and discussion

This section examines the democratic implications of autocoups by analysing their effects on Polity V scores, both in the immediate aftermath and in the medium term. Table 5.1 presents four models: Models 1 and 2 report results for attempted autocoups, while Models 3 and 4 pertain to successful autocoups. Within each group, Models 1 and 3 assess immediate effects (in the event year), whereas Models 2 and 4 evaluate medium-term effects (three years after the event).

Immediate democratic impact

Consistent with the first hypothesis, autocoups and coups are associated with significant immediate declines in Polity V scores. In both Models 1 and 3, autocoups—whether attempted or successful—lead to a statistically significant reduction of approximately 1.3 points in Polity V scores in the event year, all else equal. These effects are comparable in magnitude across both attempted and successful autocoups, suggesting that the democratic damage materialises irrespective of whether the attempt fully succeeds.

Traditional coups are associated with larger immediate declines. Model 1 shows that attempted coups reduce Polity V scores by 1.31 points, while successful coups, in Model 3, lead to a drop of 2.12 points, both significant at the 1% level. These findings confirm that both types of irregular power grabs deliver immediate shocks to democratic institutions, though coups—especially successful ones—inflict greater disruption.

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

	Dependent variable: Differences of Polity V scores			
	Attempted		Succeeded	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Autocoup	−1.276*** (0.201)	−0.338 (0.322)	−1.290*** (0.226)	−0.130 (0.360)
Coup	−1.312*** (0.091)	1.203*** (0.127)	−2.120*** (0.124)	1.868*** (0.183)
GDP per Capita	−0.003** (0.001)	−0.009*** (0.002)	−0.003** (0.001)	−0.010*** (0.002)
Economic Trend	−0.428 (0.277)	−0.563 (0.480)	−0.329 (0.275)	−0.635 (0.480)
Log Population	0.178** (0.070)	0.755*** (0.122)	0.188*** (0.070)	0.734*** (0.122)
Political Violence	0.015 (0.014)	0.033 (0.024)	0.012 (0.014)	0.033 (0.024)
Non-Democracy	0.809*** (0.062)	−0.776*** (0.109)	0.797*** (0.062)	−0.775*** (0.109)
Cold War	−0.235*** (0.063)	−0.092 (0.109)	−0.224*** (0.063)	−0.116 (0.109)
Observations	9,104	9,104	9,104	9,104
R ²	0.047	0.028	0.055	0.030
Adjusted R ²	0.029	0.009	0.036	0.011
F Statistic	55.436***	32.690***	64.970***	34.462***

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Medium-term divergence: coups vs. autocalups

In the medium term, however, the political trajectories begin to diverge: while coups are followed by significant improvements in Polity V scores, autocalups continue to exert a negative effect, albeit one that does not reach statistical significance.

Models 2 and 4 evaluate changes in Polity V scores three years after the event. The results indicate that autocalups have no statistically significant effect in the medium term—whether attempted or successful—implying that the initial democratic decline is not followed by subsequent institutional reform or recovery. In contrast, attempted coups are associated with a significant increase of 1.2 points, and successful coups show a particularly strong rebound of 1.87 points, both at the 1% significance level.

These findings provide clear support for the second hypothesis. Whereas coups tend to exhibit a “U-shaped” pattern—with democratic erosion followed by recovery—autocalups demonstrate a consistent, unidirectional decline in democratic quality, with no evidence of rebound.

The results suggest that autocalups exert their impact primarily in the short term, as reflected in the immediate drop in Polity V scores, while offering no potential for democratic revitalisation in the medium term. This contrasts with coups, which, although initially disruptive, sometimes serve as catalysts for institutional renewal, particularly in cases where they are followed by electoral processes or popular mobilisation.

These findings reinforce the notion that autocalups function to entrench incumbents, undermining constitutional safeguards and consolidating executive power. By contrast, coups—particularly those that displace entrenched regimes—may open space for institutional realignment or liberalisation, depending on the post-coup political context.

The models incorporate a range of control variables to isolate the effects of coups and autocalups:

GDP per capita is negatively and significantly associated with changes in Polity V scores across all models. This counterintuitive negative association may reflect the limited potential

for democratic gains in already high-income democracies, where Polity V scores are near their ceiling.

Log of population size is positively and significantly associated with Polity score changes, suggesting that larger states may possess greater institutional adaptability or reform potential.

The results for non-democratic regimes (defined as those with Polity V scores below -6) reveal a temporal asymmetry in their effects on democratic outcomes. In the event-year models (Models 1 and 3), non-democratic regimes are associated with significant positive changes in Polity V scores. This likely reflects cases where short-term liberalisation or reform efforts follow leadership crises or institutional ruptures, producing modest democratic gains even within authoritarian contexts. By contrast, in the three-year models (Models 2 and 4), the effect reverses direction: non-democratic regimes are associated with significant declines in Polity V scores over the medium term. This pattern suggests that early signs of liberalisation often fail to consolidate and may be followed by renewed authoritarian entrenchment. In essence, while non-democratic regimes may exhibit initial democratic openings—whether symbolic or procedural—these gains are frequently short-lived, with longer-term trajectories reverting to autocratic norms. This dynamic underscores the fragility of democratic progress in authoritarian contexts, where reforms introduced in the aftermath of institutional disruption are often superficial or strategically instrumental, lacking the structural support required for sustained democratisation.

Cold War context is statistically significant only in the event-year models, where it correlates with a decline in Polity V scores, reflecting the broader global pattern of democratic suppression during the Cold War period.

Political violence and economic growth do not show consistent or significant effects, indicating that immediate democratic outcomes are more sensitive to regime characteristics and structural factors than to short-term economic or security conditions.

Overall, the empirical results offer robust support for both hypotheses. Autocoups and coups both lead to significant immediate declines in democratic quality, with coups inflicting

greater short-term damage. In the medium term, coups are often followed by democratic recovery, whereas autocoups result in persistent democratic erosion with no evidence of rebound.

These findings suggest that autocoups represent a particularly insidious form of democratic backsliding, less dramatic than coups but ultimately more damaging in their long-term effects. They reinforce the need for greater scholarly and policy attention to constitutional manipulations by incumbents, which, although often gradual and legally framed, can produce lasting democratic decay.

Robustness tests

To assess the robustness of the main findings, a series of alternative model specifications were estimated. The results confirm that the core conclusions remain stable under these variations.

First, the operationalisation of the autocoup variable was modified: the decay function used in the baseline analysis was replaced with a binary indicator distinguishing between attempted and successful autocoups. Additionally, the broad ‘non-democracy’ category was disaggregated into more specific regime types—military, personalist, presidential, parliamentary, and ‘other’—with dominant-party regimes serving as the reference category. This classification mirrors the approach used in the determinants analysis of autocoups presented in earlier chapters. The results of these robustness models are presented in Models 5 to 8 in Table 5.2.

Consistent with the main models, autocoups remain significantly associated with negative changes in Polity V scores in the short term (Models 5 and 7), with coefficients of -1.236 and -1.234 , respectively (both significant at the 1% level). However, in the three-year models (Models 6 and 8), the effect becomes statistically insignificant, indicating that the negative effect of autocoups is immediate but not sustained over time.

By contrast, coups continue to show a distinct “U-shaped” effect. In the event-year models (Models 5 and 7), coups are associated with significant declines in Polity V scores (-1.366 and -2.190), both at the 1% level. Yet in the three-year models (Models 6 and 8), the effect reverses

Table 5.2: The Impact of Autocoups on Democratization: Binary Autocoups

	Dependent variable: Differences of Polity V scores			
	Attempted		Succeeded	
	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Autocoup	−1.236*** (0.200)	−0.148 (0.359)	−1.234*** (0.226)	−0.057 (0.402)
Coup	−1.366*** (0.091)	1.240*** (0.157)	−2.190*** (0.123)	1.712*** (0.215)
GDP per Capita	−0.003** (0.001)	−0.010*** (0.002)	−0.003** (0.001)	−0.010*** (0.002)
Economic Trend	−0.387 (0.277)	−0.569 (0.482)	−0.282 (0.276)	−0.629 (0.482)
Log Population	0.247*** (0.072)	0.890*** (0.126)	0.262*** (0.072)	0.879*** (0.126)
Political Violence	0.015 (0.014)	0.044* (0.024)	0.012 (0.014)	0.046* (0.024)
Regime: Military	0.602*** (0.101)	−0.545*** (0.177)	0.574*** (0.101)	−0.584*** (0.178)
Personal	−0.042 (0.094)	−0.532*** (0.164)	−0.065 (0.094)	−0.526*** (0.164)
Presidential	−0.576*** (0.091)	0.399** (0.158)	−0.578*** (0.090)	0.381** (0.158)
Parliamentary	−0.475*** (0.105)	0.965*** (0.182)	−0.468*** (0.104)	0.966*** (0.182)
Other	0.999*** (0.114)	1.094*** (0.199)	1.013*** (0.114)	1.115*** (0.199)
Cold War	−0.168*** (0.064)	−0.002 (0.111)	−0.156** (0.063)	−0.011 (0.111)
Observations	9,036	9,036	9,036	9,036
R ²	0.060	0.033	0.068	0.033
Adjusted R ²	0.041	104 0.014	0.049	0.014
F Statistic	47.043***	25.244***	53.742***	25.364***

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

direction: coups are now associated with large positive changes in Polity V scores (+1.240 and +1.712, also significant at the 1% level). This confirms the earlier interpretation that while coups may cause immediate democratic disruption, they are often followed by democratic recovery in the medium term.

The disaggregated regime type variables provide additional insights. Military regimes show significant positive effects in the event-year models (Models 5 and 7), with coefficients of +0.602 and +0.574, but become negative and significant in the three-year models (−0.545 and −0.584 in Models 6 and 8). This reversal suggests that initial post-event liberalisation in military regimes is not sustained, and may even regress.

Personalist regimes are consistently associated with negative and significant effects in the three-year models (Models 6 and 8: −0.532 and −0.526), but not in the two-year models, suggesting that their democratic erosion becomes more evident over time.

Presidential and parliamentary democracies follow a similar pattern: both show significant negative effects in the short term (Models 5 and 7), and positive, statistically significant effects in the medium term (Models 6 and 8). For example, parliamentary democracies are associated with a drop of −0.475/−0.468 in the short term but show a gain of +0.965/0.966 over three years. This pattern supports the idea that democratic institutions may initially be shaken by political disruption but recover when institutional mechanisms are strong.

“Other” regimes (likely transitional or provisional systems) show consistently large and positive effects across all models, ranging from +0.999 to +1.115, all significant at the 1% level. This implies that these regimes tend to transition toward more democratic forms over both short and medium time frames.

Several control variables also behave consistently with the baseline models. GDP per capita is negatively and significantly associated with changes in Polity V scores across all models, again likely reflecting ceiling effects in advanced democracies with limited room for improvement. Log of population is positively and significantly related to Polity changes, reinforcing earlier interpretations that larger states may possess greater reform potential or be more likely to

register changes in democratic performance. Political violence becomes statistically significant only in the three-year models (Models 6 and 8), where it has a small positive effect (+0.044, +0.046), suggesting that prolonged unrest may precede some form of institutional response or democratic opening. The Cold War variable is significant only in the event-year models (Models 5 and 7), where it is associated with small negative effects (−0.168 and −0.156), consistent with broader patterns of democratic suppression during the Cold War period.

These robustness models confirm the main findings while offering additional nuance. These results underscore the importance of both regime context and temporal scope in evaluating the consequences of irregular power grabs. Autocoups, unlike coups, represent a consistently negative force for democratic institutions—one that undermines without paving the way for recovery.

5.5 Summary

This chapter has examined the impact of autocoups on democratic institutions by analysing changes in Polity V scores, with a comparative focus on traditional coups. Two key hypotheses guided the analysis: first, that autocoups are associated with consistent declines in democratic quality, particularly in the short term; and second, that while coups often generate initial disruptions, they tend to produce a “U-shaped” effect, marked by subsequent democratic recovery or even advancement in the medium term.

The empirical results offer strong support for these hypotheses. Across multiple model specifications, autocoups—whether attempted or successful—exhibit significant negative effects on Polity V scores in the event year, but these effects do not persist into the medium term. In contrast, coups are associated with significant democratic improvement three years after the event, despite an initial decline. This pattern is robust across models incorporating disaggregated regime types, alternative lag structures, and extended time horizons.

The analysis further reveals important variation across regime types. Military and person-

alist regimes, while sometimes exhibiting modest democratic gains in the immediate aftermath, tend to experience declines in Polity V scores over time, suggesting a return to entrenched authoritarianism. Presidential and parliamentary democracies, by contrast, initially register democratic decline but tend to recover within three years—consistent with institutional resilience. Notably, transitional or provisional regimes (“other” types) display consistently strong democratic gains, underscoring their potential for reform during periods of flux.

The findings carry several theoretical and policy-relevant implications. While coups are widely recognised as pivotal events in the study of regime change, autocoups deserve greater scholarly attention. Unlike coups, which may at times catalyse democratic transitions, autocoups represent a systematically anti-democratic mechanism, typically employed to erode checks on executive power and extend incumbents’ rule. Moreover, as shown in Chapter 4, autocoup leaders tend to retain power for longer periods—nearly a decade on average—compared to less than seven years for coup-installed leaders, implying more durable institutional consequences.

This chapter also advances the methodological literature by emphasising the importance of temporal framing. Many political shocks—particularly autocoups—are preceded by elite purges, electoral manipulation, or institutional weakening. Consequently, focusing solely on post-event changes risks overlooking the cumulative nature of democratic decline. The findings thus support a more longitudinal and process-oriented approach to studying regime erosion.

Nevertheless, limitations remain. Notably, coups and autocoups occasionally occur in close temporal proximity, making it difficult to disentangle their respective contributions to changes in Polity V scores. Future research should seek to better isolate these overlapping effects, perhaps through finer-grained event sequencing or qualitative case tracing.

In sum, this chapter reinforces the view that autocoups are a critical yet underexplored driver of democratic backsliding. Their often-subtle execution belies their long-term consequences. As such, they warrant continued empirical scrutiny and deeper integration into both the comparative democratisation literature and policy frameworks concerned with defending

constitutional governance.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

This study commenced with a central research question: why are some political leaders prematurely removed from office, while others succeed in extending their tenure beyond constitutionally mandated limits? It further inquired into how such irregular transitions of power affect leadership survival and democratic trajectories. In addressing these issues, the research focused on an often overlooked yet significant phenomenon—the **autocoup**—and undertook a systematic comparison with conventional coups. Through conceptual refinement, the construction of a novel dataset, and rigorous empirical analyses, the study has illuminated both the similarities and distinctions between coups and autocoups in terms of their drivers, consequences for leadership survival, and implications for democratic governance.

6.1 Main findings

A key contribution of this research lies in the incorporation of autocoups into the analytical framework of irregular power transitions. From this foundation, the study offers four principal findings:

First, concerning conceptualisation and empirical grounding, this study addresses the prevailing fragmentation in the literature, characterised by the proliferation of overlapping and in-

consistently applied terms such as self-coup, autogolpe, and executive aggrandisement, as well as a lack of systematic data ([Marsteintredet and Malamud 2019](#); [Baturu and Tolstrup 2022](#)). **Chapter 2** proposes a more analytically rigorous definition of an autocoup: the act of an incumbent leader extra-constitutionally extending their tenure beyond term limits. Building on this conceptual foundation, the chapter introduces and makes publicly available the first global dataset on autocoup events, encompassing 83 attempted (of which 64 were successful) cases from 1945 to 2023. This resource provides a robust empirical basis for future quantitative research.

Second, to address the scarcity of large-N empirical studies on the determinants of autocoups, **Chapter 3** presents original research which demonstrates that regime type significantly influences the likelihood of an autocoup. Whereas traditional coups are typically associated with unstable or fragmented political systems—particularly military regimes ([J. Powell 2012b](#); [Frantz and Stein 2016](#); [Powell et al. 2018](#); [Thyne and Powell 2019](#); [Kim and Sudduth 2021](#))—autocoups are more prevalent in regimes with highly centralised and relatively stable executive authority. The analysis reveals that presidential democracies and personalist authoritarian regimes are significantly more susceptible to autocoups than dominant-party regimes, highlighting the vulnerabilities created by concentrated executive power and weak institutional constraints.

Third, although leadership survival has received substantial attention in the literature ([Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003](#); [Svolik 2014](#); [Frantz and Stein 2016](#); [Sudduth and Bell 2018](#); [Davenport, RezaeeDaryakenari, and Wood 2021](#)), little research has explored the survival of leaders following autocoups. **Chapter 4** addresses this gap by comparing the post-event tenure of leaders who assumed or extended power via coups or autocoups against those who came to power via other means. While initial analysis suggested that autocoup leaders may remain in office longer, a time-dependent Cox proportional hazards model—controlling for regime type and other covariates—found no statistically significant difference in removal risk based solely on the mode of power acquisition. Instead, the regime type proved more consequential:

leaders in military and personalist regimes face a significantly higher risk of removal than their counterparts in dominant-party regimes. These findings corroborate those in Chapter 3, reinforcing the central role of institutional context in shaping leadership durability.

Fourth, while existing literature has primarily examined the democratic consequences of traditional coups (C. Thyne and Powell 2014; Derpanopoulos et al. 2016; M. K. Miller 2016; Dahl and Gleditsch 2023), **Chapter 5** offers a novel investigation into the democratic outcomes of autcoups. The findings indicate that although both coups and autcoups result in immediate declines in Polity V scores, autcoups are uniquely associated with sustained democratic deterioration. Specifically, autcoups result in a consistent decline in Polity V scores and no signs of recovery over the medium term, whereas traditional coups more commonly exhibit a “U-shaped” trajectory, with an initial decline followed by partial democratic recovery within three years. This pattern underscores the particularly deleterious and enduring impact of autcoups on democratic institutions.

6.2 Policy implications

The findings of this research not only contribute to academic understanding of irregular power transitions but also offer valuable insights for policymakers confronting the challenges of democratic backsliding and institutional fragility.

First, the analysis underscores the importance of institutional design. **Chapter 3** demonstrates that regimes with highly centralised executive authority are more vulnerable to autcoups, echoing earlier research on the significance of regime type and institutional architecture (Geddes 1999; Frantz and Stein 2016). Strengthening horizontal accountability mechanisms—such as independent legislatures, judiciaries, and oversight bodies—is vital for constraining executive overreach and preventing the circumvention of constitutional norms. Key institutional safeguards include robust term limits, an empowered civil society, and transparent procedures for political succession. These elements are crucial for building resilience against executive

aggrandisement and authoritarian consolidation.

Second, international and regional responses to irregular power grabs must evolve to account for the subtler nature of autocrats. While standardised responses to military coups have become more established, **Chapters 4 and 5** reveal that autocrats often proceed incrementally and under a veneer of legality. Consequently, organisations such as the African Union (AU), the Organisation of American States (OAS), and the European Union (EU) must adopt more proactive and vigilant approaches ([Wobig 2014](#); [Shannon et al. 2014](#); [C. Thyne et al. 2017](#)). In addition to condemning overt military takeovers, these bodies should apply sustained diplomatic and economic pressure against efforts to subvert term limits or manipulate electoral processes. In doing so, they can more effectively uphold democratic norms and deter authoritarian drift.

Third, **Chapter 5** illustrates the importance of gradual and continuous monitoring of democratic indicators. Autocrats, unlike classic coups, often lack dramatic ruptures and unfold under institutional façades. As such, tools like Polity V scores, Freedom House ratings, and V-Dem indices should be employed more systematically to detect early signs of democratic erosion. Policy-makers, scholars, and civil society actors must be attentive to incremental shifts in these indicators to enable timely interventions aimed at preserving democratic integrity.

6.3 Limitations and directions for future research

Despite its contributions, this study also has limitations that point to fruitful directions for further inquiry.

First, conceptual and data refinement remains necessary. The definition of autocrat and the dataset introduced in **Chapter 2** are preliminary. Further scholarly discussion is needed to delineate clearer conceptual boundaries, especially in borderline cases where term limits are circumvented through legal or quasi-legal mechanisms. More precise coding rules and classification criteria would enhance the reliability of future datasets.

Second, methodological challenges persist. The analysis in **Chapter 3** treats autocoup attempts as a binary outcome; yet, autocoups may represent a gradual process involving multiple stages or attempts. Future research could benefit from time-series or event history models that better capture the temporal dynamics and sequencing of autocoup behaviour. Furthermore, distinguishing the effects of coups and autocoups—given their occasional interdependence—remains a methodological challenge deserving further attention.

Third, there is a need to broaden the empirical scope. This study has focused on term extension as a specific form of executive power consolidation. However, other forms of power expansion—such as the erosion of legislative or judicial independence—are also critical to understanding authoritarian resilience ([Marsteintredet and Malamud 2019](#); [Baturu and Tolstrup 2022](#)). Future research might construct a more comprehensive dataset encompassing various dimensions of executive aggrandisement to more fully capture the processes of democratic backsliding and authoritarian entrenchment.

By offering a comparative analysis of coups and autocoups, this study enhances our understanding of irregular power transitions and the mechanisms of authoritarian persistence. Autocoups—marked by their gradual, concealed progression and erosion of institutional safeguards—pose a distinctive threat to contemporary democracy. Through conceptual innovation, empirical rigor, and analytical clarity, this research lays a foundation for further scholarly inquiry and practical engagement with one of the most pressing challenges to democratic resilience in the 21st century. Continued efforts in refining concepts, accumulating data, and exploring causal mechanisms will be vital in uncovering the complex pathways through which democracy weakens or endures.

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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.