

Irregular Leadership Transitions and Political Stability: A Survival Analysis of Coups and Autocoups

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Abstract

This study explores and compares the survival time of two categories of irregular-entry political leaders: those who ascend to power through coups and those who overstay their legitimate term limits (autocoups). The central hypothesis posits that the mode of accession to power influences the duration of their tenures. Utilizing survival analysis, the results indicate that leaders who overstay their terms through autocoups generally remain in power longer than those who come to power through coups.

Keywords: Coups, Autocoups, Survival, Political Leadership

1 Introduction

The survival of political leaders has been a well-studied topic in political science. However, two specific types of leaders - those who come to power through coups and those who overstay their legitimate terms (autocoup leaders) - have received comparatively less attention. Examining the tenures of these irregularly ascended leaders holds particular significance for two main reasons.

Firstly, leaders who ascend through irregular means constitute the majority of irregular exits from power. According to Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza (2009), between 1945 and 2015, out of 1,472 leaders who assumed office through regular channels, approximately 213 exited irregularly (14.5%). Conversely, out of 308 leaders who assumed office through irregular means, roughly 158 (51.3%) experienced irregular exits.

Secondly, among irregularly ascended leaders, the majority gained power through launching coups or overstaying in office. As per Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza (2009), out of 374 leaders who exited irregularly, 246 were ousted through coups, constituting 65.8% of these cases. Additionally, between 1945 and 2020, there were 106 attempts to overstay in power, of which 86 were successful (?). Leaders who extend their legitimate term limits essentially stage coups against legitimate successors, thereby qualifying as autocoup leaders. Hence, it is both relevant and insightful to delve into and compare the tenures of coup-entry leaders and autocoup leaders.

While it is expected that autocoup leaders survive longer than coup-entry leaders when considering their total tenures, a more insightful comparison arises when examining the tenures following autocoups in contrast to those of coup-entry leaders. Conducting a log-rank test in survival analysis on the leaders dataset (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009) and the author's autocoup dataset Zhu (2024)] reveals a distinct contrast between autocoup leaders and coup-entry leaders.

Preliminary findings from survival analysis (see Figure 1) indicate a significant difference. Leaders who consolidate power through autocoups appear to have a longer average tenure after the autocoup itself (approximately 10.9) compared to coup leaders (approximately 5.3). This suggests a potential shortfall of 5 years in the average tenure of coup leaders.

Thus, we hypothesize that the method of accession significantly influences leadership longevity.

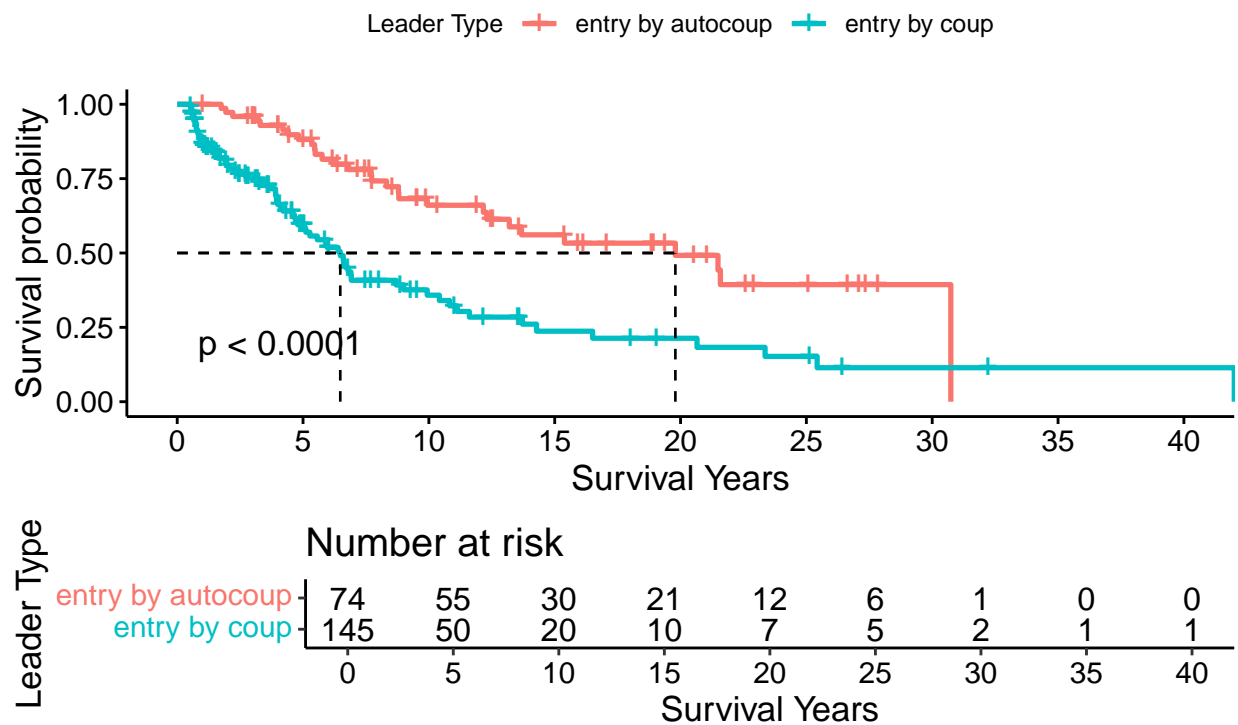


Figure 1: Survival curves of overstaying and coup-entry leaders

Coup leaders likely face greater challenges to their legitimacy, leading to a more precarious initial period in power. They may encounter higher levels of uncertainty, instability, and pressure to share power, all of which could contribute to a shorter average tenure compared to autoup leaders.

By employing the Cox proportional hazards model and the extended Cox model, the results suggest that leaders who exceed their term limits generally experience longer tenures compared to those who come to power through coups.

This study offers two key contributions. First, it highlights a critical factor often overlooked in leadership survival studies: the impact of accession method. Leaders' survival is not solely determined by their actions after taking power, but also by the way they acquired power in the first place. This research underscores the significant difference in tenure duration between autoup and coup leaders. Second, it provides empirical measurements to compare the tenure duration of these two irregularly ascended leaders, offering insights into their distinct impacts on leadership longevity.

The remainder of the paper delves deeper into this topic. Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive literature review on political survival, establishing the context for this research. Chapter 3 explores the factors influencing the survival of coup and autocoup leaders. Chapter 4 outlines the methodology and data used, including the application of survival models to analyse the determinants of leadership longevity. Chapter 5 presents the findings of the analysis and a detailed discussion of the results. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes by synthesizing the key takeaways and exploring their broader implications.

2 Literature review

The topic of political survival has been a cornerstone of political science research for decades. This enduring interest stems from the vast variations observed across regimes, countries, and historical periods. Before delving deeper into the subject, it is crucial to distinguish between two distinct yet interconnected concepts: regime survival and individual leader survival.

Regime survival focuses on the longevity of political systems, such as monarchies, political parties, or specific ideological structures. Leader survival, on the other hand, is concerned with the duration of individual leaders' time in office. These two concepts often exhibit contrasting patterns. For example, in parliamentary democracies like Japan or the UK, specific political parties may hold power for extended periods while individual leaders (Prime Ministers) change frequently. Similarly, communist regimes typically see long-lasting parties in power, with leadership transitions occurring at a slower pace. In contrast, presidential systems like the United States or some military regimes experience more frequent changes in both the ruling party and the head of government. This study specifically investigates the dynamics of individual leader survival, focusing on the factors influencing how long leaders remain in power.

The existing literature on leader survival is vast and multifaceted, offering a wealth of insightful perspectives. Some studies delve into the specific mechanisms that influence leadership longevity within particular regimes, such as democracies or autocracies. Others seek to develop more gen-

eralizable theoretical frameworks that can explain leader survival across diverse political systems. While the development of a universal theory remains an alluring goal, it is important to acknowledge the inherent challenges in creating a single model that encompasses the complexities of leadership survival across all regime types.

Transparent and inclusive vs. Opaque and exclusive

First of all, the mechanisms governing power transitions differ dramatically in different countries, particularly between democracies and autocracies. The key distinctions in the leadership selection process can be characterized as follows: transparent vs. opaque and inclusive vs. exclusive.

In many autocratic systems, leadership selection is a closed affair. Potential candidates are often restricted to a narrow pool, such as royal families, military elites, or members of the ruling party. Selection processes are shrouded in secrecy, and dissent can be met with harsh consequences. Even elections exist in some autocracies, like Russia, there may have significant barriers to entry for legitimate challengers. Potential rivals may face threats like assassination, imprisonment, or exile.

This lack of transparency makes it difficult to gauge true levels of public support as in democracies. Calculating selectorates or winning coalitions, as explored by Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003), becomes a near-impossible task. Leadership transitions in autocracies often hinge on internal power struggles rather than public opinion. A dictator may retain power despite low public support.

In contrast, democracies have relatively open competition for leadership positions. Challengers can openly campaign and garner support through public speeches, media campaigns, and grassroots movements. If no single candidate commands a majority, factions can collaborate, leading to power transitions with broader public backing. This allows for a more accurate assessment of power dynamics through public opinion polls and electoral performance.

Regular and predictable vs. Irregular and unpredictable

Secondly, beyond the differences in openness and inclusivity, leadership transitions in autocra-

cies and some democracies are far more irregular and unpredictable compared to stable democracies.

Many autocratic regimes lack institutionalized mechanisms for succession or term limits. A leader's tenure often hinges on their ability to maintain control and consolidate power. Certain dictators maintain an indefinite grip on power until their death, subsequently transferring authority to family members, such as sons in the cases of Syria and North Korea, or brothers in Cuba. This can also lead to unexpected and irregular leadership changes. Leaders may be ousted through coups, rebellions, uprisings, or popular protests. The opacity surrounding power dynamics can also contribute to instability. Even seemingly strong leaders can be overthrown by a small, well-positioned faction within the regime. Take, for instance, Henri Namphy, who assumed the presidency of Haiti following a coup in June 1988, only to be ousted by another coup a mere three months later in September of the same year. However, Qaddafi, the dictator of Libya, seized power in a coup in 1969 and ruled for over 40 years before being killed in 2011 by NATO-backed rebel forces (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009).

In contrast, stable democracies experience regular and predictable leadership transitions. Formal institutions, such as term limits, set clear boundaries for how long leaders can remain in office. For example, US presidents are limited to a maximum of two terms, regardless of their popularity. Similarly, in autocratic Mexico from 1919 to 2000, each president served a fixed six-year term without facing overthrows or overstay, as noted by (Klesner 2019).

The study of political survival is particularly captivating due to the intricacies and uncertainties associated with irregular leadership transitions. While regular and anticipated leadership changes are important, they offer less fertile ground for exploring the dynamics of leader longevity. The vast majority of leaders who assume power through established channels also exit power through established mechanisms (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009). This research delves into the factors influencing the survival of leaders who achieve power through irregular means, as these transitions often hinge on complex political calculations, power struggles, and unforeseen events.

Due to the above discussions, the diverse mechanisms influencing political leadership survival

have prompted scholars to delve deeper into regime-specific dynamics. For instance, research by Svolik (2014) examines democracies, while Davenport, RezaeeDaryakenari, and Wood (2021) focuses on autocracies. A particular more focus lies on understanding unexpected tenures, where leaders either fail to complete their terms or overstay their mandates.

In analysing dterminants of leader survival, two primary perspectives have been used to explain leader survival. The first considers contextual factors and resources available to leaders. These include elements like personal competence (Yu and Jong-A-Pin 2016), societal stability (Arriola 2009), economic development (Palmer and Whitten 1999; Williams 2011), access to natural resources (Smith 2004; Quiroz Flores and Smith 2012; Wright, Frantz, and Geddes 2013), and external support networks(Licht 2009; Wright 2008; Thyne et al. 2017). The second perspective explores the strategies leaders employ to implement their agendas. This includes both the leaders' political goals and their responses to opposition, challenges, or even coups and rebellions (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Morrison 2009; Escribà-Folch 2013; Davenport, RezaeeDaryakenari, and Wood 2021).

Unsurprisingly, coups have received significant scholarly attention due to their role in removing authoritarian leaders (Svolik 2009; Frantz and Stein 2016). Existing research explores both strategies for thwarting coups (Powell 2017; Sudduth 2017a; De Bruin 2020) and how leaders extend their tenures after surviving coup attempts (Easton and Siverson 2018). For example, Sudduth (2017b) examines the post-coup actions of dictators, focusing on purge strategies. They argue that coup leaders initially hold more power than elites within the regime, making them less susceptible to subsequent coups. This challenges the conventional view of new leaders as inherently weak (Roessler 2011). Despite this distinction, both Sudduth and Roessler acknowledge that new leaders often consolidate power by purging rivals (Sudduth suggests this occurs when there is minimal risk, while Roessler argues it happens when threats are perceived). While the debate on the initial strength of coup leaders continues, both perspectives agree that early purges are more likely.

Sudduth and Bell (2018) investigates how leaders' entry methods affect their removal in dictatorships. They argue that irregular entry does not necessarily increase the likelihood of removal. In

fact, some forms of irregular entry may offer protection. However, their focus was on how leaders lose office, not how long they stay in power. Additionally, they compared six types of irregular leaders without specifically examining the distinction between coup-entry and autocoup leaders.

While scholars have extensively analysed leader survival across various contexts, including universal frameworks, autocratic regimes, and the aftermath of failed challenges, a significant gap remains. There is a lack of research specifically exploring and comparing the survival tenures of leaders who extend their tenures through autocoups compared to those who come to power through coups d'état. This study aims to address this gap by investigating and comparing the duration of leadership survival between these two distinct leader types.

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