

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

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Abstract

This study aims to clarify the concept of overstay coups, focusing on power extensions by incumbent leaders. By distinguishing overstay coups from the broader, more ambiguous concepts of self-coups or autocoups, which encompass both executive power aggrandizement and power extension, this research introduces a refined understanding of these specific political events.

The research involves coding overstay coup events and compiling a comprehensive dataset covering the period from 1945 to the present. Using this dataset, two detailed case studies provide qualitative insights into the dynamics and outcomes of overstay coups. Additionally, a regression analysis identifies the determinants of overstay coup attempts, shedding light on the factors that influence incumbents' decisions to extend their power illegitimately.

The findings contribute to the existing literature by providing a clearer conceptual framework and empirical evidence on overstay coups. This research enhances our understanding of the mechanisms and motivations behind power extensions by incumbent leaders, and it examines the implications for democratic resilience, democratic backsliding, democratic breakdown, personalization of power, and autocratic deterioration. The insights gained from this study inform policy and theoretical discussions on political stability and the challenges facing contemporary democracies.

Keywords: Coups, Autocoups, Political Leadership

1 Introduction

The study of irregular power transitions, encompassing both irregular entries and exits from office, has long been a central topic in political science. However, one form of irregular power transition - the incumbent leader's refusal to relinquish power - remains relatively understudied. This scenario, where leaders overstay their mandated term limits for one or more terms, or even indefinitely, lacks a universally accepted term in the existing literature. To address this gap, this study adopts the term "autocoup" to denote this phenomenon.

Coups, being the primary form of irregular power transitions, have received significant scholarly attention. Research by Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza (2009) indicate that coups account for a substantial portion of such transitions, with roughly two-thirds (65.8%) of 374 irregular exits occurring through coups. Additionally, Frantz and Stein (2016) demonstrate that coups are the most common form of exit in autocracies, surpassing regular transitions by a third.

However, while coups were once frequent, recent decades have witnessed a decline in their occurrence (Bermeo 2016; Thyne and Powell 2019). Conversely, autocoups appear to be on the rise, particularly since the Cold War's end (Ginsburg, Melton, and Elkins 2010; Baturo 2014; Versteeg et al. 2020). Despite the significant political impact and rising prevalence of autocoups, their study lags behind that of classical coups, which are extensively documented due to their historical frequency (Thyne and Powell 2019).

This research aims to bridge this gap by focusing on the understudied phenomenon of autocoups as they are at least equally important and warrant comprehensive analysis. Firstly, autocoups are typically accompanied by a disregard for the rule of law, weakened institutions, and potential democratic backsliding or authoritarian personalization. Secondly, like traditional coups, successful autocoups increase the risk of future irregular power transitions. Research indicates that since 1945, approximately 62 percent of leaders who overstayed their term limits through autocoups in non-democratic countries were either ousted or assassinated while in office (Baturo 2019). Thirdly, failed autocoups often trigger instability that fuels protests, violence, and even civil wars.

Despite their significance, autocoups are understudied compared to traditional coups. Although

several relevant concepts and terminologies such as self-coups, autoups, autogolpes, incumbent takeovers, executive aggrandizement, overstay, and continuismo have been proposed and discussed (Marsteintredet and Malamud 2019; Baturo and Tolstrup 2022), there is no clear and widely accepted term to describe these events. Different terms are often used interchangeably or inconsistently, leading to confusion. Moreover, due to the lack of clear concepts, the collection of autoup datasets is still in its early stages compared to the rich datasets of traditional coups. Hence, the limited existing studies on autoups have primarily relied on case studies (Maxwell A. Cameron 1998b; Antonio 2021; Pion-Berlin, Bruneau, and Goetze 2022), with few focusing on quantitative analyses.

To fully understand irregular political leadership transitions and survival, we need to redefine and clarify the term “autoup” first. Based on a clear definition, we can introduce an autoup dataset that can be used for further empirical analysis. This study aims to address these knowledge gap surrounding autoups and contribute in three areas. First, it clarifies the terminology by defining autoups based mainly on power extension. Second, it introduces a new dataset of autoups since 1945 based on this refined definition. Finally, the research utilizes this dataset for a quantitative analysis of the factors that influence leaders’ decisions to attempt autoups.

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

2 Autocoups: A literature review and clarification of definitions

Compared to coups, which are clearly defined and widely accepted as illegal attempts by elites within the ruling group to overthrow the leadership ([Powell and Thyne 2011](#)), the concept of autocoups (also known as self-coups or autogolpes) suffers from a lack of consistency and clarity. This ambiguity hinders our understanding and study of a critical phenomenon in irregular power transitions. To address this gap, we need to tackle two key issues: terminology and definition.

2.1 Terminology

The most common term in autocoup literature is self-coup, or autogolpe in Spanish ([Przeworski et al. 2000](#); [Maxwell A. Cameron 1998a](#); [Bermeo 2016](#); [Helmke 2017](#); [Marsteintredet and Malamud 2019](#)). This term gained academic prominence after Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori dissolved Congress, temporarily suspended the constitution, and ruled by decree in 1992 ([Mauceri 1995](#); [Maxwell A. Cameron 1998b](#)). However, as Marsteintredet and Malamud (2019) point out, the term “self-coup” can be misleading, as it implies a coup against oneself, which is inaccurate since it is not self-directed but targets other state institutions or apparatus.

Another approach to describe coups staged by incumbents is to use terms with adjectives or modifiers, such as presidential coup, executive coup, constitutional coup, electoral coup, judicial coup, slow-motion coup, soft coup, and parliamentary coup ([Marsteintredet and Malamud 2019](#)). While these terms can be helpful in specific contexts, their proliferation often adds to the overall confusion rather than providing clarification. Most of these terms focus on the specific methods used by coup perpetrators but fail to clearly identify the perpetrator, necessitating further explanation. In fact, many of these methods could be employed either by or against executive leaders.

A third alternative involves terms like “incumbent takeover” or “executive takeover,” referring to “an event perpetuated by a ruling executive that significantly reduces the formal and/or informal constraints on his/her power” ([Baturo and Tolstrup 2022, 374](#)), based on earlier research ([Svolik](#)

2014). These terms identify the perpetrator (the incumbent) and the nature of the event (a power grab). However, “incumbent takeover” does not highlight the illegality or illegitimacy of these actions. Therefore, it cannot serve as a direct counterpart to “coup,” which clearly denotes the illegality of leadership ousters, while “takeover” diminishes the severity.

Therefore, this study strongly advocates for “autocoup” as the most accurate and appropriate term. It avoids the pitfalls of other terms by clearly conveying the essence of the phenomenon as a coup-like power grab and effectively distinguishing autocoups from classical coups by highlighting the perpetrator.

2.2 Definition

While terminology is important, another issue arises with the previous definition of autocoups: should we emphasize power expansion or power extension? Power Expansion refers to situations where an executive branch expands its power beyond its original boundaries, often by encroaching on the authority of other branches like the legislature or judiciary. Power Extension, on the other hand, refers to situations where a leader extends their tenure in office beyond the originally mandated term limits. Existing definitions of self-coup or autocoup sometimes touch upon power extensions, but they primarily focus on power expansions, which has several drawbacks.

Firstly, defining autocoups primarily in terms of power expansion does not align well with the definition of a coup. When we define a classical coup, the focus is clearly on the ouster of the current leader, not merely a limitation or restriction on their power. Using the same logic, a more appropriate definition of an autocoup should prioritize the extension of executive leadership. We would not classify an event as a coup if a vice president seizes some power from the president, as long as the president remains in office. Similarly, an executive leader acquiring more power from other branches should not automatically qualify as an autocoup if their term limits remain unchanged.

Secondly, emphasizing power expansion raises issues regarding the purpose of launching an autocoup. As Maxwell A. Cameron (1998a) defined, a self-coup is “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” (Maxwell A. Cameron 1998a, 220). However, without extending their time in office, the leader faces significant risks once their term expires, as they could face legal or political repercussions for the autocoup itself, leaving behind an overly powerful executive branch for the successor. Although the term “self-coup” gained prominence from the 1992 Fujimori case in Peru, which initially involved seizing power from other institutions, it is important to note that Fujimori ultimately extended his term limits through constitutional amendments. The 1993 Constitution allowed Fujimori to run for a second term, which he won with popularity in April 1995. Shortly after Fujimori began his second term, his supporters in Congress passed a law of “authentic interpretation” which effectively allowed him to run for another term in 2000, which he won amid suspicions and rumors. However, he did not survive the third term. In 2000, facing charges of corruption and human rights abuses, Fujimori fled Peru and took refuge in Japan (Ezrow 2019).

Thirdly, measuring the extent of power expansion to qualify as an autocoup can be challenging. Power expansion might occur as a sudden, significant event, as seen with Fujimori in 1992, or it could be gradual and incremental, as in the case of Putin since assuming power in 1999 (Chaisty 2019). In the latter case, it is unclear whether each step should be considered an autocoup or if the entire process together should be labelled as such. If the latter, determining the point at which it becomes an autocoup is again problematic.

Therefore, this study argues that a more accurate definition of autocoups should prioritize power extension as the core characteristic.

In light of this discussion, we formally define an autocoup as *the practice of current political leaders extending their time in office beyond their originally mandated term limits*. Two key points need to be highlighted. Firstly, this definition does not exclude power expansion, but its primary characteristic is extending the term in office. Secondly, the essence of an autocoup is illegitimate, although it often employs seemingly legal mechanisms, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter III.

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