

Autocoups and Democracy

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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.

Keywords: *Coups, Autocoups, Democratization*

1 Introduction

The decline in global political rights and civil liberties, as documented by reports such as Freedom House’s Freedom in the World 2024, marks the eighteenth consecutive year of democratic backsliding worldwide ([Freedom House 2024](#)). This sustained erosion naturally raises the question: What political mechanisms primarily drive the decline in liberties and democratic quality?

One of the primary suspects historically linked to episodes of democratic recession and the decline in global liberties since 2000 has been the coup d’état—the violent, non-constitutional seizure of power. However, an emerging paradox challenges the view of coups as the main contemporary perpetrator of backsliding. Data from the most cited coup datasets suggest a secular decline in the frequency of traditional coups; specifically, the number of coup attempts between 2008 and 2017 represented the lowest ten-year total since at least 1960 ([J. M. Powell and Thyne 2011](#); [Thyne and Powell 2019](#)). Furthermore, despite ongoing scholarly debates, a significant body of empirical literature contends that coups may exert a positive or complex long-term effect on democratization by removing entrenched dictatorships and breaking political logjams ([J. Powell 2014](#); [C. Thyne and Powell 2014](#); [Dahl and Gleditsch 2023](#)). If traditional coups are decreasing and their long-term democratic effect is ambiguous or even restorative, they may not be the principal driver of the current, steady decline in global liberties. This critical gap compels us to search for an alternative, more insidious mechanism of regime erosion.

In sharp contrast to the trend in traditional coups, a similar but distinct political event—the autocoup—has increased notably since 2000 ([Bermeo 2016](#); [Bature and Tolstrup 2022](#); [Zhu 2024](#)). An autocoup is defined as the extension of an incumbent leader’s tenure in office beyond the originally mandated limit via extra-constitutional manipulation in this study ([Zhu 2024](#)). While both coups and autocoups disrupt established political orders, autocoups involve the insidious erosion of democratic norms from within by the very leader sworn to uphold them. Despite the growing prevalence and conceptual significance of this phenomenon, its specific impact on democracy and regime transitions remains under-examined.

This article undertakes the first empirical investigation into the democratic consequences of autocoups. Its primary objective is to determine whether autocoups, in the current global context, entrench authoritarian rule, facilitate democratization, or have no substantive impact on regime trajectories. Given the conceptual and empirical parallels to coups, a secondary aim is to conduct a focused comparative analysis of their respective effects on democratization to clarify their broader political ramifications.

To address these questions, this study employs a fixed-effects model to evaluate the respective impacts of coups and autocoups on democratic quality, operationalized through Polity V scores. The findings demonstrate a critical divergence:

While both coups and autocoups are associated with an immediate decline in democratic quality, the impact differs significantly over time. Polity V scores affected by coups typically exhibit a notable recovery within two years. Conversely, democratic quality impacted by autocoups shows no such improvement over the same period, indicating a longer and deeper impact on the erosion of democracy.

This study makes two principal contributions to political science. Firstly, it provides the first systematic empirical analysis of the impact of autocoups on democratization, establishing them as a distinct political phenomenon and addressing a critical gap in the literature on democratic backsliding. Secondly, by comparing the effects of coups and autocoups, this research demonstrates the more severe and sustained damage to democratic institutions caused by the latter. This underscores the urgent need to treat autocoups not merely as a variant of executive aggrandizement but as a distinct political pathology warranting focused scholarly and policy attention.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Section 2 examines the mechanisms through which autocoups impact democratic institutions, 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 sig-

nificance for understanding and addressing autocoup dynamics.

2 Autocoups: Definition and Measurement of Democratic Impact

2.1 Defining the Irregular Transition

Traditional political science has focused on the **coup d'état**, defined by Powell and Thyne (2011) as “illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive.” This definition focuses on **leadership turnover** and **external disruption**.

In contrast, the **autocoup** refers to the phenomenon of an incumbent leader’s refusal to relinquish power and has received comparatively less scholarly attention, despite its growing frequency. Since the end of the Cold War, while classic coups have declined, these “incumbent retention” or “overstay” strategies have become more frequent (Ginsburg, Melton, and Elkins 2010; Baturo 2014).

To conduct a valuable pioneer analysis, this study formally defines the **autocoup as the extension of an incumbent leader’s tenure in office beyond the originally mandated limit, achieved through extra-constitutional means**.

2.2 Data Compilation

To operationalize this definition, I **compile a new autocoup dataset** based on three complementary sources:

- **Leader Identification:** I utilize the Archigos dataset (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009) and the Political Leaders’ Affiliation Database (PLAD) (Bomprezzi et al. 2024) to identify *de facto* national leaders and their precise time in office (1945–2023).

- **Event Inventory:** I use the Incumbent Takeover dataset ([Baturo and Tolstrup 2022](#)) as the primary inventory of potential autocoup events.
- **Cross-Referencing:** Entries from the Incumbent Takeover dataset are cross-referenced with Archigos and PLAD to isolate only those events that meet the strict definition of an autocoup (illegal tenure **extension**).

2.3 Measuring Impact on Democracy

The scholarly literature on the impact of traditional coups on democratization often evaluates political outcomes through **binary regime classifications** (e.g., democratize, autocratize) ([C. Thyne and Powell 2014; Derpanopoulos et al. 2016](#)). This framework is appropriate for coups, which trigger abrupt leadership replacement and thus easily captured dichotomous shifts.

However, this binary framework is **inadequate for measuring and comparing the impact of autocoups**. An autocoup retains the existing leader, meaning it rarely triggers immediate changes in regime labels. The absence of nominal transition thus **obscures the true consequence: the subversion of institutional constraints that regulate executive power**.

For this reason, to evaluate the political impact of autocoups, a **more sensitive and continuous approach is required**. This study employs the **Polity V score** (from the Polity5 dataset), which ranges from -10 (full autocracy) to $+10$ (full democracy). This continuous measure enables the detection of **incremental degradation** in executive constraints and political participation, aligning with recent research on subtle democratic backsliding ([Dahl and Gleditsch 2023](#)).

3 Theoretical framework: Autocoups as a Mechanism of Democratic Erosion

3.1 Beyond Traditional Determinants: Rethinking the Drivers of Democratic Decline

Research on democratization has long centered on two broad explanatory traditions. The first, rooted in modernization theory, contends that rising levels of socioeconomic development promote democratic outcomes by expanding education, cultivating a middle class, and strengthening economic autonomy (Lipset 1959). A cross-national analyses of Robert Barro, Nobel laureate in economics, similarly suggest that increases in GDP per capita, schooling, and human development indicators are associated with higher levels of democratic rights (Barro 1999). Subsequent scholarship, however, complicates these early claims. Drawing on data from 167 countries between 1875 and 2004, Miller (2012) shows that economic development can simultaneously entrench authoritarian leaders by lowering the likelihood of violent removal from office. Rather than uniformly facilitating transitions, modernization may stabilize non-democratic regimes just as effectively as it supports democratic consolidation. These mixed findings highlight the limits of economic explanations for the contemporary global drift toward illiberal governance.

A second major strand of literature focuses on coups d'état as pivotal moments shaping regime trajectories. Historically, coups were broadly associated with instability and democratic backsliding. Post–Cold War evidence, however, paints a more nuanced picture. Several scholars find that coups—successful or even failed—may at times open pathways to democratization, particularly when they dislodge entrenched autocrats or induce elites to pursue reforms (C. Thyne and Powell 2014; Marinov and Goemans 2013). The prevalence of competitive multi-party elections following many post–Cold War coups reinforces this more conditional interpretation. Yet these democratizing outcomes hinge on international pressure, domestic coalitions,

and the ambitions of those orchestrating the coup. As a result, the long-term consequences of coups remain inconsistent and difficult to predict.

Although economic development and coups continue to shape regime dynamics, neither tradition adequately accounts for the systematic pattern of institutional erosion that has unfolded across regions since the early 2000s—especially given the simultaneous decline in the frequency of conventional coups ([Powell and Thyne 2011](#); [C. Thyne and Hitch 2020](#)). This mismatch between theory and contemporary trends underscores the need to incorporate additional mechanisms into our understanding of democratic decline.

One particularly salient development is the rise of the autocoup. Rather than seizing power through overt military intervention, an increasing number of leaders have extended their rule by subverting institutional and constitutional procedures from within. Notable examples include Vladimir Putin, Aleksandr Lukashenko, Xi Jinping, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Nayib Bukele ([Bature and Elgie 2019](#); [Bature and Tolstrup 2022](#)). Even long-standing democracies have proven vulnerable: Donald Trump’s attempt to overturn the 2020 U.S. election sparked widespread debate about the possibility of an American self-coup ([Antonio 2021](#); [Pion-Berlin, Bruneau, and Goetze 2022](#)). Empirically, there are 83 documented autocoups, 64 of which succeeded; strikingly, 46—more than half—have occurred since 2000, mirroring the global downturn in democratic quality during the same period.

In this context, the autocoup stands out as a critical yet understudied driver of democratic erosion. Examining this phenomenon is essential for understanding the defining pattern of regime change in the 21st-century: the slow, strategic, and internally driven dismantling of democratic institutions by incumbents intent on maintaining power.

3.2 Why Autocoups Matter: Leadership Agency and Authoritarian Intent

Autocoups warrant attention not only because their incidence has risen markedly since the early 2000s, but also because they highlight a dimension that democratization research has long underemphasized: the agency and ambitions of political leaders. Much of the existing literature privileges structural determinants—economic performance, natural resource endowments, regime characteristics—while giving relatively less weight to the individuals who initiate and shape political events. Yet leadership choices are often decisive, especially in hybrid regimes or fragile democracies where institutional constraints are weak and political trajectories hinge on elite behavior. Nowhere is this clearer than in the context of autocoups. Episodes of autocratic consolidation frequently reflect deliberate strategies by incumbents seeking to extend their rule, protect themselves from legal or political threats, or reshape the political order to their advantage.

Despite this, scholarship often assumes that political leaders share similar preferences—most notably, the desire to remain in office for as long as possible. Classic work on leader survival, for instance, generally treats leaders as uniformly motivated to maximize tenure ([Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003](#)). Yet this assumption obscures important variation. Some leaders choose to leave office even when they possess the capacity to overstay. George Washington’s voluntary exit from power stands as a foundational example of restraint and democratic commitment ([Bature and Elgie 2019](#)). The challenge is that leaders rarely disclose their intentions outright. Authoritarian aspirations are typically concealed, and even firmly autocratic regimes routinely uphold democratic façades to maintain legitimacy.

Autocoups, however, provide an unusually clear and observable indicator of authoritarian intent. When an incumbent seeks to extend tenure through unconstitutional means, the act constitutes an unequivocal violation of democratic norms. A leader committed to democratic principles can respect term limits and step down; only a leader with authoritarian ambitions

chooses to circumvent the constitutional framework.

This makes autocoups analytically significant in two ways. First, they offer a form of revealed preference: a direct signal of a leader’s willingness to subvert democratic institutions for personal or political gain. Second, they operate as an institutional mechanism, initiating or accelerating processes of democratic erosion. Whereas many political actions are ambiguous or context-dependent, an autocoup represents a deliberate repudiation of the institutional rules governing democratic succession.

By capturing both intent and institutional effect, autocoups illuminate a critical dimension of contemporary democratic decline—one that cannot be explained fully by structural factors alone.

3.3 The Causal Mechanisms: How Autocoups Damage Democratic Institutions

Autocoups drive democratic erosion through a cumulative, multi-stage process that begins well before the formal extension of tenure and continues long after the event. This process unfolds through three mutually reinforcing mechanisms: preparation, execution, and consolidation.

3.3.1 Pre-Autocoup Preparation: Weakening Constraints and Neutralizing Opposition

Democratic deterioration often precedes the autocoup itself. To ensure an uncontested breach of constitutional limits, incumbents must first neutralize actors capable of blocking the attempt. This preparatory phase typically involves purging rival elites and reshuffling security leadership; restricting media freedoms and targeting independent journalism; weakening judicial autonomy; harassing or banning opposition parties; and using state resources to reinforce patronage networks.

Such actions systematically erode the institutional foundations of oversight and public accountability. Alberto Fujimori’s 1992 self-coup in Peru—after which the Polity V score plunged

from +8 to -4—was preceded by a series of moves aimed at undermining watchdog institutions and sidelining political opponents ([Cameron 1998](#)). These pre-emptive strategies constitute the first wave of democratic degradation: deliberate, incremental actions that lower the costs and raise the likelihood of a successful unconstitutional power grab.

3.3.2 Execution: Violating the Constitutional Order and Destroying Succession Norms

The autocoup marks a decisive rupture in the democratic order. By overriding term limits, dissolving legislatures, or overriding judicial authority, incumbents violate the basic norm governing peaceful leadership rotation. Term limits are among the most important safeguards against personalist rule; once they are dismantled, the credibility of constitutional rules collapses.

This rupture produces two major consequences. First, it delegitimizes the institutional framework: elites and citizens receive a clear signal that legal constraints are malleable and contingent on incumbent preferences. Second, it creates a dangerous precedent. Once a constitutional barrier is broken, subsequent violations—by the same leader or future leaders—become easier to justify and harder to resist. The result is a cascading effect, where the uncertainty surrounding future succession increases the risk of irregular or destabilizing transitions.

This stage constitutes the most visible and dramatic expression of democratic breakdown.

3.3.3 Post-Autocoup Consolidation: Structural Incentives for Repression

After securing an unconstitutional extension of power, the autocoup leader faces heightened vulnerability. Having violated democratic rules, they risk prosecution or retaliation should they ever leave office. This creates powerful incentives to consolidate authoritarian control as a survival strategy.

Leaders in this stage must suppress opposition, deter elite defections, and prevent any institutional opening that might threaten their tenure. These incentives generate a self-reinforcing authoritarian drift characterized by intensified repression, the concentration of executive power,

politicization of the security apparatus, permanent weakening of horizontal accountability, and the indefinite postponement of democratic restoration.

Democratic erosion thus accelerates because the leader's political survival becomes inseparable from maintaining the system that subverts democratic institutions. Consolidation ensures that institutional decay is not merely abrupt but persistent.

Given this multi-stage sequence, autocrups produce a sharp and immediate institutional discontinuity. Although incumbents remain in office, the scale of democratic rupture is similar to that triggered by traditional coups, as both events fundamentally disrupt established rules of succession and governance.

H1: Autocoups will lead to a significant decline in Polity V scores immediately following their occurrence, comparable in magnitude to the effects observed after traditional coups.

This expectation reflects the inherent severity of the constitutional breach: an autocoup constitutes an acute violation of democratic order, generating an immediate deterioration in formal institutional quality.

3.4 Divergent Long-Term Trajectories: Why Autocoups Are More Damaging Than Coups

Although autocrups and coups can generate comparable short-term institutional disruptions, their long-term trajectories diverge markedly. The extensive literature on coups documents substantial variation in their aftermath: some coups deepen authoritarianism, others trigger liberalization, and a notable share open pathways to democratization. Autocoups, in contrast, produce a far more consistent pattern of sustained democratic decline.

A key reason lies in their relative success rates. Autocoups succeed at far higher levels—approximately 77 percent globally ([Zhu 2024](#))—whereas only about half of traditional coups do so ([Powell and Thyne 2011](#)). The costs of failure also differ dramatically. Failed coup plotters are often imprisoned, exiled, or killed; failed autocoup leaders typically retain office or

complete their term ([Bature 2019](#)). This asymmetry gives autocoup leaders significantly more opportunity to reshape political institutions.

Survival in office further amplifies this asymmetry. Autocoup leaders remain in power, on average, five years longer than coup-installed leaders ([Zhu 2024](#)). This expanded time horizon allows them to entrench loyalists, reconfigure elite networks, and erode alternative centers of authority. Many coup-installed leaders, by contrast, are removed before they can institutionalize durable changes, limiting the long-term impact of their rule.

Traditional coups also produce diverse institutional outcomes. Some successful coups remove deeply authoritarian incumbents and pave the way for democratic openings ([C. Thyne and Powell 2014; Miller 2016](#)). Failed coups can pressure incumbents to enact reforms. Importantly, many coup plotters seek domestic and international legitimacy, creating incentives to promise—or at least signal—democratic restoration. In Niger, President Mamadou Tandja’s unconstitutional bid for a third term in 2009 provoked a military coup in 2010 that subsequently restored multiparty elections ([Miller 2016](#)). In Honduras the same year, President Manuel Zelaya was ousted after seeking to alter constitutional rules on re-election ([Muñoz-Portillo and Treminio 2019](#)). These examples underscore how coups often respond to, or attempt to correct, executive overreach.

Autocoups follow a fundamentally different logic. Having violated the constitutional order, the incumbent cannot credibly commit to liberalization without exposing themselves to prosecution, exile, or retaliation. The structural incentives created by an autocoup—rooted in personal survival and institutional manipulation—push leaders toward deeper authoritarian consolidation rather than reform. Liberalization becomes not merely unlikely but personally dangerous.

Because autocoups are motivated by self-preservation and carried out from a position of institutional dominance, their long-term effects are uniformly damaging. They lock political systems into an authoritarian trajectory that is difficult to reverse.

H2: Autocoups generate sustained declines in Polity V scores that do not rebound,

whereas traditional coups often follow a U-shaped trajectory characterized by an initial decline followed by gradual democratic improvement.

Thus, while coups may under certain conditions open space for democratization, autocoups overwhelmingly produce enduring—and often irreversible—democratic erosion.

4 Methodology and variables

4.1 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 autocoups. The event-year effect is measured as the change in Polity V score in the year of the autocoup 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 autocoup:

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

This three-year specification is intended to capture medium-term political developments, as autocoups 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 autocrups, separate models are estimated using binary variables that code for autocoup attempts and successes, respectively.

4.2 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 democracy). 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 autocrups. For models analysing attempted autocrups, 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 autocrups. Second, coups and autocrups 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 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 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).

5.1 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.

5.2 Medium-term divergence: coups vs. autocoups

In the medium term, however, the political trajectories begin to diverge: while coups are followed by significant improvements in Polity V scores, autocoups 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 autocoups 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—autocoups demonstrate a consistent, unidirectional decline in democratic quality, with no evidence of rebound.

The results suggest that autocoups 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, some-

Table 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

times 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 autocracies 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 autocracies:

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.

5.3 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 mir-

rors 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 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 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

Table 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	21 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

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.

6 Conclusion

This article has examined the institutional consequences of autocoups through a comparative analysis of their effects on Polity V scores relative to traditional coups. Guided by two expectations—that autocoups produce immediate and consistent democratic decline, and that

coups often follow a U-shaped trajectory marked by medium-term recovery—the findings offer clear empirical support for both.

Across multiple model specifications, autocoups—attempted or successful—generate significant reductions in democratic quality in the event year, with no subsequent rebound. Coups, by contrast, yield initial democratic deterioration but are associated with measurable improvement within three years. These patterns persist across alternative lag structures, extended temporal windows, and models disaggregating regime types.

The analysis also highlights meaningful variation across political systems. Military and personalist regimes occasionally exhibit short-term gains but ultimately slip toward renewed authoritarianism. Presidential and parliamentary democracies tend to recover from initial declines, reflecting their institutional resilience. Transitional regimes experience the most substantial democratic gains, suggesting heightened reform potential during moments of political flux.

These results have important implications for the study of regime change. While coups remain central to debates on authoritarian durability and democratic transitions, autocoups warrant far greater scholarly attention. They represent a systematically anti-democratic strategy—one rooted in incumbents’ efforts to evade constraints and extend their tenure. That autocoup leaders remain in office significantly longer than coup-installed leaders underscores their capacity to reshape institutions in enduring ways.

The article also underscores the importance of temporal framing in analyses of democratic erosion. Many of the dynamics associated with autocoups—elite purges, legal manipulation, and the weakening of oversight institutions—begin well before the formal event, reinforcing the need for longitudinal approaches that capture cumulative processes rather than discrete shocks.

Some limitations remain. In particular, autocoups and coups sometimes occur in close succession, complicating causal identification. Future research should develop finer-grained event sequencing or mixed-method designs to better disentangle overlapping effects.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that autocoups constitute a distinctive and espe-

cially damaging mechanism of democratic backsliding. Their legality-tinged execution obscures their profound institutional consequences, yet their impact is durable, asymmetric, and systematically negative. As autocrats become increasingly prominent in global politics, understanding their causes, dynamics, and consequences is essential for both scholarly analysis and policy efforts aimed at defending constitutional governance.

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