

# Autooups: Conceptual Clarification and Analysis of Power Extensions by Incumbent Leaders

Zhu Qi  
University of Essex  
[qz21485@essex.ac.uk](mailto:qz21485@essex.ac.uk)

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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

Understanding how political leaders come to power and leave office is crucial in political science. Traditionally, research has focused on two main exit routes: leaders who are forced out before their term ends (e.g., coups) or those who complete their terms and leave voluntarily. However, a growing trend of leaders attempting to extend their term limits through illegitimate means has been understudied. This research examines these power extensions by political leaders, or autocoup as defined in this study.

It is not surprising that coups, as the primary form of irregular exits, have garnered significant academic attention in previous studies. According to Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza (2009), out of 374 leaders who exited irregularly, 246 were ousted through coups, accounting for 65.8% of these cases. Frantz and Stein (2016) shows that coup-related exits account for roughly one-third of all exits in autocracies, surpassing any other type, including regular transitions.

In recent decades, however, once the most common means of leadership change, traditional coups have become less frequent (Bermeo 2016; Thyne and Powell 2019). In contrast, autocoups, which are perpetrated by incumbent leaders instead of against the incumbents, become more prevalence (Ginsburg, Melton, and Elkins 2010; Baturo 2014; Versteeg et al. 2020). While traditional coups are well-documented (Thyne and Powell 2019) due to its significant impact on politics, the equally effects of autocoups, if not more important, have received much less research attention compared to coups.

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 irregular power transitions in the future. Research indicates that since 1945, approximately 62 percent of leaders who successfully overstayed their term limits through autocoups in non-democratic countries were either ousted or assassinated while in office (Baturo 2019). Thirdly, failed overstay coups often trigger instability that fuels protests, violence, and even civil wars.

Despite its significance in politics, autocoup is understudied compared to coups. Although

several relevant concepts or 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 or terms to describe this type of coups. Sometimes, several different terms are used to describe the same, or at least similar, situations or events, while sometimes the same term is used to describe two different situations without clear distinction. For instance, self-coups, autoups, and autogolpes are normally used to refer to “when a president closes the courts and the legislature, suspends the constitution, and rules by decree until a referendum and new legislative elections are held to approve broader executive powers” (Cameron 1998), but power extensions are also included in their discussion although they should not be by their definitions. Moreover, due to the widely accepted concepts, the collection of autoup datasets are in a very primitive stage compared to the rich datasets of coups, hence the limited existing studies on autoups have primarily relied on case studies (Cameron 1998; Antonio 2021; Pion-Berlin, Bruneau, and Goetze 2022), with few focusing on quantitative analyses.

In order to fully understand irregular political leadership transition and survival, it is crucial to redefine and clarify the term of autoup in the first place. Based on the clear definition of the concept and term, we can continue to introduce the autoup dataset which can be used for further empirical analysis.

This study aims to address the knowledge gap surrounding autoups and contribute in three areas. First, it clarifies the terminology by defining autoups dependent 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.

Understanding how political leaders come to power and leave office is crucial in political science. Traditionally, research has focused on two main exit routes: leaders who are forced out before their term ends (e.g., coups) or those who complete their terms and leave voluntarily. However, an increasing trend of leaders extending their term limits through illegitimate means has been understudied. This research examines these power extensions by political leaders, specifically focusing on the concept of autcoups as defined in this study.

It is not surprising that coups, as the primary form of irregular exits, have garnered significant academic attention. According to Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza (2009), out of 374 leaders who exited irregularly, 246 were ousted through coups, accounting for 65.8% of these cases. Frantz and Stein (2016) show that coup-related exits account for roughly one-third of all exits in autocracies, surpassing any other type, including regular transitions.

In recent decades, however, traditional coups have become less frequent (Bermeo 2016; Thyne and Powell 2019). In contrast, autcoups—perpetrated by incumbent leaders to extend their own rule—are becoming more prevalent (Ginsburg, Melton, and Elkins 2010; Baturo 2014; Versteeg et al. 2020). While traditional coups are well-documented due to their significant political impact (Thyne and Powell 2019), the equally important effects of autcoups have received much less research attention.

Firstly, autcoups 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 autcoups increase the risk of future irregular power transitions. Research indicates that since 1945, approximately 62 percent of leaders who overstayed their term limits through autcoups in non-democratic countries were either ousted or assassinated while in office (Baturo 2019). Thirdly, failed autcoups often trigger instability that fuels protests, violence, and even civil wars.

Despite their significance, autcoups 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. For instance, self-coups, autoups, and autogolpes are normally used to refer to “when a president closes the courts and the legislature, suspends the constitution, and rules by decree until a referendum and new legislative elections are held to approve broader executive powers” (Cameron 1998), but power extensions are also included in their discussion, despite not fitting the definitions. 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 (Cameron 1998; 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 Overstay coup: Relevant terms and a new definition**

### **2.1 Relevant terms on power expansions and power extensions**

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