

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

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the dynamics of irregular power transitions, particularly coups and autocoups, and their influence on leader survival. It highlights the critical role of power dynamics, shaped by regime types, in determining coup success rates and attempt frequency. Utilizing Heckman's two-stage selection model, the study reveals that expected coup success significantly influences attempts, with military regimes facing a heightened vulnerability due to their power structure.

While often understudied, autocoups are shown to have a substantial impact on democratic trends. This research introduces a refined definition of autocoups alongside a novel dataset encompassing events from 1945 to 2022, enabling a more robust quantitative analysis.

Employing survival analysis, the study compares the longevity of leaders who rise to power through coups versus autocoups. The findings demonstrate that coup-installed leaders face a significantly shorter tenure and higher risk of removal. This contrasts with autocoup leaders who manipulate the system to extend their rule, suggesting the potential for autocoups to incentivize power grabs and contribute to democratic backsliding.

This work contributes significantly to the political science literature by:

- Defining key concepts: It establishes a clear definition of autocoups, a previously understudied phenomenon.
- Introducing a novel dataset: This dataset enables researchers to conduct more comprehensive quantitative analyses of autocoups.
- Establishing a general framework: The framework provides a comparative approach to studying the dynamics of irregular power transitions and their impact on democratic stability.

Keywords: Coups, Autocoups, Power transitions, Leadership Survival

1 Introduction

1.1 Research question

Irregular power transitions, marked by a disregard for constitutional procedures, are a critical area of study in political science. They not only disrupt established rules but often require unconstitutional tactics to secure power. Furthermore, these transitions can inspire copycat behaviour among other ambitious leaders.

Despite their central role in political science and the extensive research conducted on irregular power transitions, a long-standing question continues to intrigue political scientists: *Why are some leaders ousted before their terms expire, while others complete their full terms or even overstay beyond their originally mandated limits?* In other words, why do some leaders survive for decades while others last for only years, months, or even days? This dissertation focuses on this question and seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis, dedicated to understanding how leaders come to power through unconstitutional means and what factors determine the duration of a leader's rule following an irregular ascent.

1.2 Analyses on coups and autcoups in a general framework

When discussing irregular power transitions, the concepts that often come to mind are irregular entries or exits, such as coups, assassinations, rebellions, protests, and foreign interventions. Among these methods, coups hold a prominent position due to their frequent occurrence. According to the Archigos dataset ([Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009](#)), from 1945 to 2015, there were approximately 145 instances of irregular leader exits, with coups accounting for more than half (79 leaders). The often-cited coup dataset ([Powell and Thyne 2011](#)) records even more leaders (245 cases) removed by coups from 1950 to 2023.

Given their prevalence and substantial influence on political systems, coups have been extensively studied, particularly since 2000 ([Thyne and Powell 2019](#)). Consequently, the concept of a coup is comparatively clear and widely accepted in academic circles. Many scholars, including

this study, follow the definition by Powell and Thyne (2011), which describes coups as “illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive... [a coup is successful] if the perpetrators seize and hold power for at least seven days” (p. 252). Although debates persist, two elements are clear: first, the perpetrators are elites within the ruling group, and the victims of coups are incumbent executive leaders. Second, the strategy or aim of a coup involves completely removing the incumbents, not merely seizing part of their power or forcing them to concede on specific policies. Beyond defining coups, several datasets have been developed for quantitative analyses, such as the Global Instances of Coups (Powell and Thyne 2011), the Cline Centre Coup d’État Project Dataset (Peyton et al. 2024), and the Colpus Dataset (Chin, Carter, and Wright 2021). These datasets are well-developed and frequently used in political science research.

However, irregular power transitions are not limited to irregular entries and exits but should also include irregular “overstays.” Using illegal means to overthrow an incumbent leader before their term expires is undoubtedly an irregular power transition. Similarly, an incumbent using illegitimate means to extend their term beyond term limits is also an irregular power transition.

Although academic attention to irregular retention of power has increased since the 1990s, especially after Peru’s President Alberto Fujimori’s self-coup in 1992, it remains comparatively understudied and has several shortcomings. First, there is no universally accepted terminology for this “overstaying in power” type of irregular power transition, unlike the clear term “coup.” Consequently, various terms such as self-coup, autogolpe, and executive coup are used by different scholars. This dissertation will use ‘autocoup’ to refer to this type of irregular power transition, which will be thoroughly discussed in Chapter 3. Second, there is no consensus on the definition of an autocoup. Existing definitions remain vague, often conflating power expansions and power extensions. For example, Cameron (1998) defines an autogolpe as a temporary suspension of the constitution and dissolution of Congress by the executive, who then rules by decree. This definition focuses on power expansion instead of power extension, leading to conceptual confusion and misalignment with the definition of a classic coup. Third, a consensus autocoup dataset is lack-

ing. While several related datasets exist, as discussed by Baturo and Tolstrup (2022) in coding their Incumbent Takeover dataset, the terminologies, definitions, and coverage years vary, lacking wide acknowledgment and extensive academic exploration. In summary, autoup has not been analysed in a comparative manner connected with coups.

Analysing coups and autoupes separately is less problematic. However, from a comprehensive framework perspective on irregular power transitions and leader survival, coups and autoupes should be, and can be, analysed within the same framework. Both coup and autoup significantly influence democratic backsliding and are the most frequent means of irregular power transition. Furthermore, as both are called “coups,” classic coups and autoupes are very similar since a coup is launched to replace the current leader, while an autoup is staged to replace the future leader.

1.3 Academic Contributions

This study addresses a critical gap in the literature by offering a comprehensive framework for analysing both coups and autoupes, which are the most common forms of irregular power transitions. While existing research often examines these topics separately with varying terminologies, definitions, methods, and datasets, this dissertation integrates these elements to provide a unified perspective on irregular power transitions and leader survival.

Our contributions are threefold:

- **Emphasis on power dynamics and regime types:** We highlight the significant role of power dynamics, particularly the influence of regime types, in determining the success and frequency of coup attempts. Our analysis underscores how the expected chances of coup success motivate such attempts, with military regimes being notably susceptible.
- **Refined definition and novel dataset for autoupes:** We introduce a refined definition of autoupes and develop a novel dataset covering events from 1945 to 2022. This enables a comparative analysis with classic coups, providing clearer insights into the nature and impact of autoupes on political systems.

- **Survival analysis of leaders from different entry modes:** By applying survival analysis to existing coup data and our new autoup dataset, we demonstrate how different modes of entry into power significantly affect leader survival. Our findings reveal that leaders who come to power through coups typically have shorter tenures and face higher removal risks compared to those who extend their rule through autoup.

Our analysis of irregular power transitions is particularly relevant to understanding democratic backsliding. These transitions violate democratic norms and disrupt the path towards stable democracy. Leaders who gain power through irregular means often employ undemocratic tactics, such as suppressing opposition, to consolidate their illegitimate hold on power. This creates a vicious cycle where the erosion of democratic institutions is both a cause and consequence of efforts to maintain power.

1.4 Overview of the thesis

This study is structured into three main chapters beyond the introduction, each addressing key aspects of irregular power transitions and their implications for political stability and democratic processes.

Chapter 2 examines the determinants of classic coup attempts. While extensive research exists on coups, most studies focus on observable factors such as economic performance, political stability, previous coups, and coup-proofing strategies. This chapter, however, emphasizes the less observable but crucial factor of expected coup success chances, which has been often overlooked. Utilizing Heckman's two-staged sample selection model, the analysis reveals that expected success rates significantly influence coup attempts. These success rates are primarily shaped by the balance of power between incumbents and challengers, which is largely determined by regime types. The findings indicate that military regimes face a much higher risk of coups compared to dominant-party regimes.

Chapter 3 focuses on the concept of autoup, specifically on power extensions by incumbent leaders. It distinguishes autoup from broader concepts like self-coups or executive coups

by redefining them as instances where incumbent leaders refuse to transition power as mandated, thereby overstaying in office. Based on this refined definition, a novel dataset of autocoup events from 1945 to 2022 is introduced, encompassing 110 attempts and 87 successes. The chapter includes case studies and empirical analyses that demonstrate the utility of this dataset for quantitative research, providing a basis for empirical analysis on autocoups.

Chapter 4 investigates how the method of power acquisition impacts the longevity of leaders who come to power through coups versus those who extend their rule through autocoups. The hypothesis is that the method of accession significantly affects leader tenure. Using the Cox proportional hazards model and a time-dependent Cox model, the chapter provides evidence of differing survival times between these two types of leaders. The results indicate that leaders who come to power through coups face a significantly higher risk of removal compared to those who extend their rule through autocoups. This finding highlights the implications for political stability and democratic processes, suggesting that the relatively low cost and high returns of autocoups could incentivize incumbents to seize power in this manner, potentially leading to democratic backsliding and the personalization of power.

In **Chapter 5**, the study concludes by summarizing the main findings, discussing policy implications, and acknowledging the limitations of the research. It also outlines directions for future research, emphasizing the need for further exploration of irregular power transitions, particularly coups and autocoups.

2 Conclusion

2.1 Main Findings

This study delves into the dynamics and implications of irregular power transitions, focusing on coups and autocoups. The findings illuminate the complex interplay between incumbents and challengers fighting for power.

Firstly, our analysis reveals that the expected success rate of a coup attempt significantly in-

fluences its likelihood. This success rate is heavily influenced by the balance of power between the incumbent regime and challengers, which is largely determined by regime type. We find that military regimes, although with more control over their own military forces, face a higher risk of coups compared to dominant-party regimes.

Secondly, the study introduces a redefined concept: the autocoup. Defined as an incumbent leader's refusal to relinquish power as mandated, this research distinguishes autocoups from broader terms like self-coups. Based on this definition, we present the first publicly available dataset of autocoup events from 1945 to 2022, encompassing 110 attempts and 87 successful autocoups. Case studies and empirical analyses demonstrate the dataset's utility for quantitative research, providing a robust foundation for further analysis on autocoups.

Thirdly, employing survival analysis techniques, the study finds clear differences in leader longevity between those who come to power through coups and those who extend their rule through autocoups. The results indicate that coup-installed leaders face a significantly higher risk of removal compared to autocoup leaders who manipulate the system to extend their rule.

2.2 Policy Implications

The findings of this study offer valuable insights for policy-makers concerned with promoting and protecting global democracy, which has faced increasing challenges despite a general post-WWII trend towards democratization. Notably, the “third wave” of democratization ([Huntington 1991](#)) witnessed a surge in democratic transitions in the late 20th century. Since the Cold War's end, democratic nations have outnumbered non-democratic ones ([Figure 1](#)) with the gap widening.

However, a “democratic recession” has emerged in recent years ([Diamond 2008](#)). Freedom House reports an 18th consecutive year of global freedom decline in 2023 ([Freedom House 2024](#)). While few countries have completely regressed to autocracy, the average global democracy level has fallen back to pre-2000 levels. Notably, democratic backsliding often occurs within regimes, with democracies becoming less liberal and autocracies becoming less competitive ([Mechkova, Lührmann, and Lindberg 2017](#)).

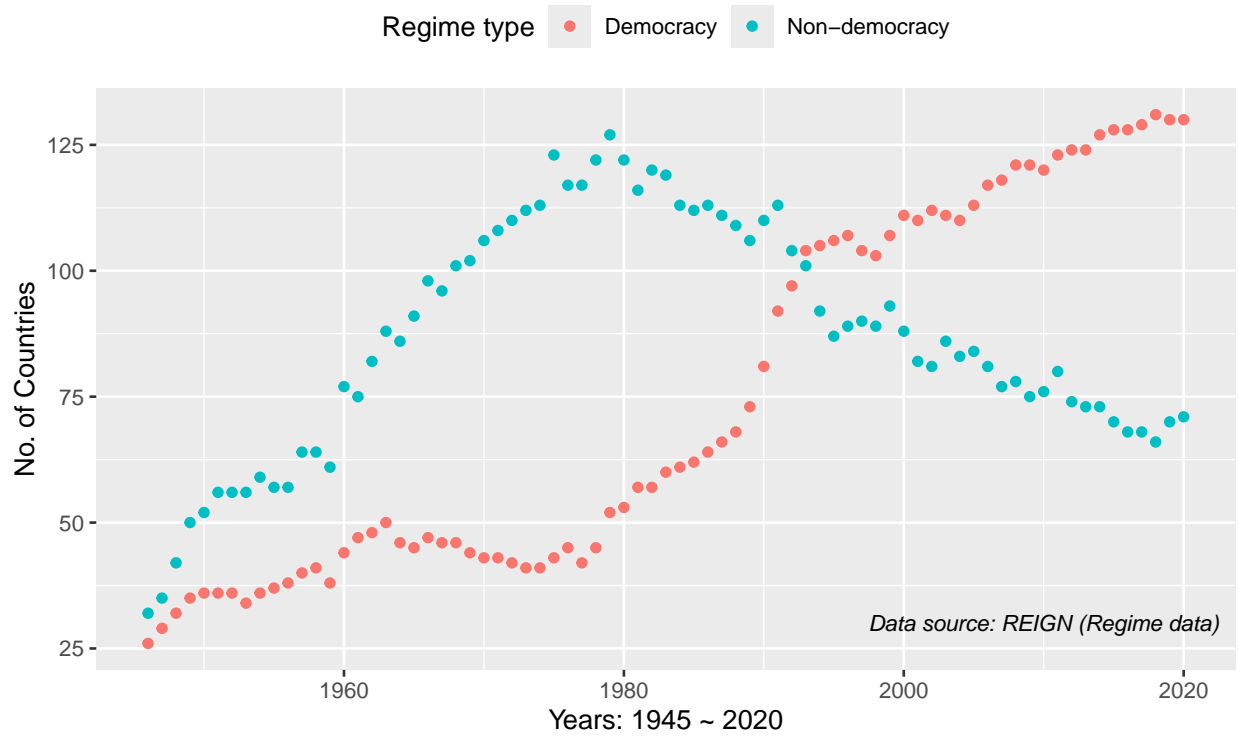


Figure 1: Comparison of the number of democratic and non-democratic countries (1945-2020)

This research highlights irregular power transitions as a significant factor in democratic backsliding within regimes. These transitions, often coups or autocoups, violate democratic norms and disrupt the path towards stable democracies. Leaders who gain power through irregular means often resort to undemocratic tactics to maintain control, creating a vicious cycle of eroding democratic institutions.

Our findings suggest that the shorter lifespans and potentially severe consequences associated with coups may deter potential coup leaders. Conversely, autocoups appear to be a more tempting option for power-hungry leaders due to their higher success rates, seemingly moderate consequences, and extended leader tenure after the autocoup. This trend may explain the decline in classic coups since the 1990s alongside the rise of autocoups ([Bermeo 2016](#)).

2.3 Limitations and directions for future research

This study offers a novel framework for analysing irregular power transitions, but some limitations require further exploration:

- **Data refinement:** Defining and classifying autoups is a new approach. Future research should validate this classification system through additional studies and expert evaluations.
- **Data harmonization:** The current analysis faces challenges due to mismatched units (country-year vs. leader) between coup and autoup datasets. Future efforts should explore data harmonization techniques for more robust comparisons.
- **Democratic backsliding:** While this study establishes a connection between irregular power transitions and democratic backsliding, further empirical evidence is needed to solidify this link.

Several avenues exist for future research:

- **Terminology and data collection:** Refining the “autoup” concept and achieving wider recognition will facilitate more accurate and comprehensive data collection.
- **Dataset expansion:** Expanding the autoup dataset with more cases and integrating it with data on other irregular leadership transitions can provide a more holistic view of political survival after these events.
- **Power dynamics and long-term impacts:** Utilizing this dataset, future studies can delve deeper into power dynamics at play and explore the long-term consequences of irregular transitions on political systems, particularly regarding democratic backsliding, breakdown, and personalization of power.

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the dynamics of irregular power transitions, specifically focusing on coups and autoups. By redefining autoups, classifying the dataset, analysing determinants, and comparing leader longevity, we establish a framework for understanding irregular

transitions and leader survival. This work contributes to a deeper understanding of democratic resilience and political stability. Future research can build upon this foundation by conducting further empirical analyses based on the novel autocoup dataset and continuing to refine the framework.

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