Autocoups and Democracy

Zhu Qi

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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 global decline in political rights and civil liberties—now extending for eighteen consecutive years (Freedom House 2024)—has renewed debate over the mechanisms driving contemporary democratic backsliding. Historically, the coup d'état has been viewed as a central threat to democratic governance, implicated in episodes of repression and the breakdown of constitutional order. Yet recent empirical patterns complicate this assumption. The incidence of traditional coups has fallen sharply: the decade from 2008 to 2017 witnessed the lowest number of attempts since 1960 (Powell and Thyne 2011; Thyne and Powell 2019). Moreover, a growing literature argues that coups can, under certain conditions, catalyze democratization by removing entrenched autocrats or resolving political deadlock (J. Powell 2014; C. Thyne and Powell 2014; Dahl and Gleditsch 2023). If coup frequency is declining and their long-term effects increasingly mixed—or even beneficial—they are unlikely to account for today's widespread erosion of democratic norms.

In contrast, another type of irregular power grab has become markedly more common since 2000: the autocoup. Unlike coups, which typically involve external attempts to unseat an incumbent (Powell and Thyne 2011), autocoups are perpetrated by incumbents themselves. In this article, an autocoup refers to the extension of a leader's tenure beyond constitutional limits through extra-legal manipulation of institutional rules (Zhu 2024). Autocoups represent a form of internally driven subversion in which executives dismantle checks and balances from within—often incrementally and under the guise of legality. Despite their rising prevalence (Bermeo 2016; Baturo and Tolstrup 2022; Zhu 2024) and clear relevance to democratic backsliding, autocoups remain under-examined in comparative politics.

Autocoups should have systematically negative institutional effects because they combine two reinforcing mechanisms: revealed authoritarian intent and structural incentives for continued repression. By violating constitutional limits, incumbents demonstrate a willingness to override institutional constraints—signaling to elites that formal rules are malleable. At the

same time, once a leader has illegally extended tenure, stepping down becomes personally risky, creating powerful incentives to further weaken oversight bodies, politicize security forces, and suppress opposition. These mechanisms predict a unidirectional, persistent erosion of democratic institutions following an autocoup.

This article provides the first systematic empirical assessment of these institutional consequences. Specifically, it compares the impact of coups and autocoups on democratic quality, operationalized through changes in Polity V scores. The analysis addresses two core questions: (1) How autocoups impact democratic backsliding? and (2) How do their effects differ from those of traditional coups? While both forms of irregular power seizure generate immediate institutional disruption, I argue that their trajectories diverge sharply over time. Coups often produce a U-shaped pattern—an initial decline in democratic quality followed by medium-term recovery—whereas autocoups yield persistent erosion with no rebound.

Using a country fixed-effects design and an original dataset of 83 autocoups (64 successful), the findings confirm these expectations. Autocoups produce significant declines in Polity V scores in the event year, and unlike coups, these declines do not reverse within three years. Coups, by contrast, exhibit immediate negative effects but are associated with significant democratic improvement in the medium term. These patterns remain robust across alternative time horizons, different specifications of irregular events, and disaggregated regime types.

The article makes two main contributions. First, it introduces autocoups as a distinct category of irregular power seizure with unique institutional consequences, filling a notable gap in the scholarship on democratic backsliding. Second, by directly comparing the effects of coups and autocoups, it clarifies why contemporary forms of executive overreach—rather than traditional military coups—may be the predominant drivers of democratic decline today.

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 Theory Framework: Autocoups and Democratic Erosion

Research on democratization has long centred on two broad explanatory traditions. The first, rooted in modernization theory, posits that rising levels of socio-economic development foster democratic outcomes by expanding access to education, cultivating a burgeoning middle class, and enhancing individual economic autonomy (Lipset 1959). For instance, cross-national analyses conducted by Robert Barro, a Nobel laureate in economics, demonstrate that elevations in

GDP per capita, levels of schooling, and broader human development indicators are positively correlated with enhanced democratic rights and freedoms (Barro 1999). This perspective has been influential, suggesting that economic progress creates societal pressures that inevitably push regimes toward greater openness and accountability.

However, subsequent scholarship has introduced significant nuances and complications to these foundational claims. Utilizing extensive data from 167 countries spanning the period from 1875 to 2004, Miller (2012) illustrates that while economic development may indeed promote certain democratic tendencies, it can paradoxically entrench authoritarian leaders by diminishing the likelihood of their violent removal from office. In other words, economic development does not uniformly facilitate democratic transitions; instead, it may stabilize non-democratic regimes just as effectively as it bolsters democratic consolidation in others. These contradictory findings underscore the inherent limitations of purely economic explanations when accounting for the contemporary global drift toward illiberal governance, where hybrid regimes and electoral autocracies persist despite economic advancements.

A second major strand of literature emphasizes coups d'état as pivotal junctures that profoundly shape regime trajectories. Historically, coups have been associated with heightened political instability and pronounced democratic backsliding, often ushering in periods of military rule or authoritarian retrenchment (Thompson 1973; Finer 1974; Huntington 1981). Yet, evidence from the post–Cold War era reveals a more nuanced and conditional picture. Several scholars argue that coups—whether successful or failed—can occasionally create unexpected openings for democratization, especially when they dislodge deeply entrenched autocrats or compel elites to initiate meaningful reforms (C. Thyne and Powell 2014). This potential for positive change is evidenced by the emergence of competitive multi-party elections in the aftermath of numerous post–Cold War coups, which sometimes lead to transitional governments or electoral pacts (Marinov and Goemans 2013).

Nevertheless, these democratizing outcomes are far from guaranteed; they depend heavily on factors such as sustained international pressure from organizations like the United Nations or

regional bodies (Arbatli and Arbatli 2014), the formation of robust domestic coalitions among opposition groups and civil society, and the underlying ambitions of the coup orchestrators themselves. Consequently, the long-term consequences of coups remain highly inconsistent, context-dependent, and challenging to predict with precision, highlighting the need for disaggregated analyses that consider regional variations and specific historical contingencies (Marinov and Goemans 2013; Derpanopoulos et al. 2016, 2017; Miller 2016; Bell 2016; C. L. Thyne and Powell 2016; Tansey 2016; Lumjiak et al. 2018; Schiel 2019; C. Thyne and Hitch 2020).

Although economic development and coups continue to influence regime dynamics in meaningful ways, neither explanatory tradition fully captures the systematic pattern of institutional erosion that has proliferated across diverse regions since the early 2000s—particularly in light of the concurrent decline in the frequency of conventional coups (Powell and Thyne 2011; C. Thyne and Hitch 2020). This theoretical-empirical mismatch prompts a reevaluation of existing frameworks, revealing the necessity to integrate additional mechanisms that better explain the subtle, incremental processes of democratic decline observed in contemporary politics. Factors such as judicial capture, media manipulation, and electoral engineering, which operate below the threshold of overt violence, demand greater attention in models of regime change.

One particularly salient and under-explored development in this regard is the rise of the autocoup. Rather than seizing power through explicit military intervention or external force, an increasing number of leaders have prolonged their rule by subverting institutional and constitutional procedures from positions of incumbency. Prominent examples include Vladimir Putin's constitutional manoeuvres in Russia, Aleksandr Lukashenko's referenda in Belarus, Xi Jinping's removal of term limits in China, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's shift to a presidential system in Turkey, and Nayib Bukele's judicial purges in El Salvador (Baturo and Elgie 2019; Baturo and Tolstrup 2022). Additional cases from the 21st century encompass Viktor Orbán's constitutional reforms in Hungary, which centralized executive authority and weakened checks and balances, and Nicolás Maduro's creation of a parallel legislative body in Venezuela to sideline opposition (Zhu 2024). Even in long-standing democracies, vulnerabilities have surfaced:

Donald Trump's efforts to overturn the 2020 U.S. election results ignited extensive debates regarding the potential for an American self-coup, underscoring the fragility of democratic norms in advanced economies (Antonio 2021; Pion-Berlin, Bruneau, and Goetze 2022). Empirically, datasets document 83 autocoups globally from 1945 to 2023, with 64 succeeding in extending incumbent tenure; notably, 46 of these—representing more than half—have transpired since 2000 (Zhu 2024), aligning temporally with the broader global downturn in democratic quality during this era.

In this evolving context, the autocoup emerges as a critical yet understudied driver of democratic erosion. Investigating this phenomenon is imperative for comprehending the defining pattern of regime change in the 21st-century: the gradual, strategic, and internally orchestrated dismantling of democratic institutions by incumbents determined to perpetuate their power. Unlike abrupt upheavals, autocoups often unfold under a veneer of legality, making them insidious and resistant to immediate international condemnation.

3.1 Why Autocoups Matter: Leadership Agency and Authoritarian Intent

Autocoups deserve scholarly scrutiny not merely due to their marked increase since the early 2000s but also because they illuminate a dimension that democratization research has historically under-emphasized: the agency, strategic calculations, and personal ambitions of political leaders. Much of the extant literature prioritizes structural determinants—such as economic performance, natural resource endowments, colonial legacies, or regime characteristics—while affording relatively less attention to the individuals who actively initiate, navigate, and shape political events. Yet, leadership choices frequently prove decisive, particularly in hybrid regimes or fragile democracies where institutional constraints are porous, and political trajectories pivot on elite behaviour and decision-making. This is nowhere more evident than in autocoup scenarios, where episodes of autocratic consolidation often stem from deliberate strategies employed

by incumbents to extend their rule, shield themselves from legal accountability or political reprisals, or fundamentally reshape the political order to align with their preferences and ideologies.

Despite this evident role of agency, scholarship frequently assumes that political leaders harbour uniform preferences—chief among them, the imperative to maximize tenure in office (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003). This assumption, while parsimonious, overlooks substantial variation in leader behaviour and motivations. Some leaders elect to relinquish power voluntarily even when they retain the institutional capacity to overstay, as exemplified by George Washington's precedent-setting retirement after two terms, which embodied restraint and a commitment to democratic principles (Baturo and Elgie 2019). The analytical challenge arises because leaders seldom articulate their intentions transparently; authoritarian aspirations are typically masked behind rhetorical commitments to stability or national interest, and even overtly autocratic regimes maintain democratic façades to bolster domestic and international legitimacy.

Autocoups, however, furnish an unusually clear and observable indicator of authoritarian intent. When an incumbent pursues tenure extension via unconstitutional channels—such as manipulating referenda, co-opting judiciaries, or dissolving oppositional bodies—the action represents an unequivocal breach of democratic norms and procedures. A leader genuinely committed to democratic governance can adhere to term limits and facilitate orderly succession; conversely, only a leader harbouring authoritarian ambitions opts to circumvent or dismantle the constitutional framework. This distinction is crucial, as it separates rhetorical posturing from behavioural evidence.

By encapsulating both intent and institutional repercussions, autocoups elucidate a pivotal facet of contemporary democratic decline—one that structural factors alone cannot adequately explain. They highlight how individual agency interacts with systemic vulnerabilities to produce enduring authoritarian shifts.

3.2 The Causal Mechanisms: How Autocoups Damage Democratic Institutions

Autocoups propel democratic erosion through a cumulative process that commences well before the formal extension of tenure and culminates in a decisive rupture. This sequence unfolds via two interconnected mechanisms: preparation and execution, each contributing to the progressive weakening of democratic safeguards.

Democratic deterioration frequently predates the autocoup event itself, setting the stage for its success. To orchestrate an uncontested violation of constitutional limits, incumbents must pre-emptively neutralize potential blockers, including rival elites, independent institutions, and societal actors. This preparatory phase commonly entails purging disloyal officials and reshuffling leadership within security forces to ensure allegiance; imposing restrictions on media freedoms while targeting independent journalists and outlets; undermining judicial autonomy through appointments of partisan judges or budgetary controls; harassing, disqualifying, or outright banning opposition parties; and leveraging state resources to fortify patronage networks that reward loyalty and punish dissent.

These manoeuvres systematically dismantle the institutional foundations essential for oversight, transparency, and public accountability. For example, Alberto Fujimori's 1993 autocoup in Peru, where he amended the constitution to allow reelection, was preceded in 1992 by dissolving Congress, temporarily suspending the 1979 Constitution, and ruling by decree (Cameron 1998). Such pre-emptive strategies represent the initial wave of democratic degradation: intentional, incremental actions that reduce the political costs of an unconstitutional power grab while elevating its probability of success. This phase often escapes immediate scrutiny, as measures are framed as administrative reforms or responses to crises, further eroding public trust over time.

In the execution of an event, the autocoup signifies a decisive rupture in the democratic order. By overriding term limits, incumbents flagrantly violate the foundational norm of peaceful

leadership rotation. Term limits, in particular, serve as one of the most vital bulwarks against personalist rule; their dismantlement undermines the credibility of the entire constitutional edifice, signalling that rules are negotiable rather than inviolable. This rupture yields two primary consequences. First, it delegitimizes the broader institutional framework: both elites and ordinary citizens internalize that legal constraints are malleable, contingent upon the incumbent's whims and power dynamics. Second, it establishes a perilous precedent, normalizing future violations—whether by the same leader or successors—and rendering them more justifiable and less resistible. The outcome is a cascading erosion, wherein uncertainty about future successions heightens the risk of irregular, destabilizing transitions, potentially inviting further interventions or unrest.

Polity V scores illustrate the political consequences of this process. When Fujimori entered office in 1990, Peru's score stood at 8, where it remained in 1991. Following the 1992 dissolution of Congress, the score plummeted to −4. After the 1993 constitutional revision, the score rose marginally to −1, where it remained throughout the rest of Fujimori's presidency. This indicates that while there was a partial recovery in institutional ratings, democratic quality never returned to pre-autocoup levels.

A similar trajectory can be observed in Belarus under Alexander Lukashenko. Upon taking office in 1994, Belarus received a Polity V score of 8. However, after Lukashenko bypassed parliamentary opposition through a controversial referendum in 1995, the score fell to 0. Following a second referendum in 1996 that extended his presidential term, the score dropped further to −7, where it has remained ever since, despite additional term extensions (Ash 2014; Baturo and Elgie 2019).

This execution stage embodies the most visible and dramatic manifestation of democratic breakdown, often accompanied by public spectacles like referenda or emergency declarations that lend a patina of popular endorsement. Given this two-stage sequence, autocoups engender a sharp and immediate institutional discontinuity. Although incumbents retain office continuity, the magnitude of democratic rupture parallels that induced by traditional coups, as both

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phenomena fundamentally disrupt established norms 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 hypothesis captures the inherent severity of the constitutional breach: an autocoup constitutes an acute violation of democratic order, precipitating an immediate deterioration in formal institutional quality, as measured by indices like Polity V.

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

Although autocoups and traditional coups may induce analogous short-term institutional disruptions, their long-term trajectories diverge substantially. As discussed earlier, extensive literature on coups reveals considerable variation in post-event outcomes: some deepen authoritarianism through repressive consolidation, others inadvertently trigger liberalization via elite pacts, and a notable proportion pave avenues for democratization, especially in contexts of popular mobilization.

Autocoups, by contrast, exhibit a more uniform pattern of protracted democratic decline, with minimal evidence of reversal or recovery. A primary explanation resides in their disparate success rates. Autocoups achieve success at markedly higher levels—approximately 77 percent globally, based on datasets covering 1945–2023 (Zhu 2024)—compared to traditional coups, which succeed in only about half of attempts (Powell and Thyne 2011). Moreover, the repercussions of failure differ starkly: failed coup plotters commonly endure imprisonment, exile, or execution, whereas failed autocoup leaders often preserve their positions or complete their terms, leveraging incumbency advantages (Baturo 2019). This asymmetry affords autocoup perpetrators greater latitude to iteratively reshape political institutions, even after partial setbacks.

Survival in office further exacerbates this disparity. Leaders who execute autocoups endure

in power, on average, five years longer than those installed via traditional coups, providing an extended temporal horizon to embed loyalists, reconfigure elite coalitions, and erode competing power centers (Zhu 2024). In contrast, many coup-installed leaders face swift ousters before institutionalizing changes, curtailing their long-term imprint.

Traditional coups also yield heterogeneous institutional results. Successful coups occasionally displace entrenched authoritarians, fostering democratic openings, as seen in cases where military interventions respond to executive overreach (C. Thyne and Powell 2014). Failed coups can compel incumbents to concede reforms under pressure. Critically, coup plotters often pursue domestic and international legitimacy, generating incentives to pledge—or at least gesture toward—democratic restoration. Illustrative examples include Niger's 2010 military coup, which ousted President Mamadou Tandja following his unconstitutional third-term bid and subsequently facilitated multiparty elections (Miller 2016), and Honduras' 2009 coup against President Manuel Zelaya, prompted by his attempts to alter re-election rules (Muñoz-Portillo and Treminio 2019). These instances demonstrate how coups can serve as corrective mechanisms against incipient authoritarianism.

Autocoups adhere to a diametrically opposed logic. Having flagrantly violated the constitutional order, the incumbent cannot credibly pledge liberalization without risking personal peril, such as legal accountability or reprisals from empowered opponents. The structural incentives engendered by an autocoup—anchored in self-preservation and institutional dominance—compel leaders toward intensified authoritarian consolidation rather than reformist concessions. Liberalization thus becomes not only improbable but existentially hazardous for the perpetrator.

For example, China's 2018 constitutional amendment, which removed presidential term limits under Xi Jinping[1], did not lead to a change in its Polity V score, which remained at −7. This reflects a broader trend observed in highly autocratic regimes (Polity V scores below −6), where there is little institutional democracy to erode, and thus limited scope for further decline.

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[1]**BBC News,** "China's Xi Allowed to Remain 'President for Life' as Term Limits Removed," *BBC News*, March 11, 2018, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-43361276, accessed March 14, 2025.

Nevertheless, some autocoups have taken place in relatively more democratic settings. In these cases, the Polity V score often remained stable, despite the circumvention of term limits. Notable examples include Argentina (1993), Brazil (1997), and Colombia (2004), where presidents amended constitutional provisions to allow re-election, but later voluntarily stepped down. In these cases, Polity V scores remained unchanged (7–8), reflecting that while term limits were relaxed, broader democratic institutions continued to function (Baturo 2019).

Because autocoups are intrinsically motivated by self-preservation and executed from entrenched institutional vantage points, their enduring effects are consistently detrimental. They entrench political systems in authoritarian pathways that prove resilient to reversal, often perpetuating cycles of repression and institutional decay.

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 specific conditions, catalyze democratizing impulses or corrective reforms, autocoups predominantly yield enduring—and frequently irreversible—democratic erosion. This distinction underscores the need for tailored policy responses, such as targeted sanctions or diplomatic isolation, to mitigate the risks posed by incipient autocoups in vulnerable regimes.

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 autocoups, 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 autocoups. For models analysing attempted autocoups, 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 autocoups. Second, coups and autocoups 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

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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.

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***	−0.338	−1.290***	−0.130
	(0.201)	(0.322)	(0.226)	(0.360)
Coup	−1.312***	1.203***	−2.120***	1.868***
	(0.091)	(0.127)	(0.124)	(0.183)
GDP per Capita	−0.003**	−0.009***	−0.003**	−0.010***
	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.002)
Economic Trend	−0.428	−0.563	−0.329	−0.635
	(0.277)	(0.480)	(0.275)	(0.480)
Log Population	0.178**	0.755***	0.188***	0.734***
	(0.070)	(0.122)	(0.070)	(0.122)
Political Violence	0.015	0.033	0.012	0.033
	(0.014)	(0.024)	(0.014)	(0.024)
Non-Democracy	0.809***	−0.776***	0.797***	−0.775***
	(0.062)	(0.109)	(0.062)	(0.109)
Cold War	−0.235***	−0.092	−0.224***	−0.116
	(0.063)	(0.109)	(0.063)	(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

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, sometimes 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 autocoups 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 autocoups:

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 mirrors 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

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***	−0.148	−1.234***	−0.057
	(0.200)	(0.359)	(0.226)	(0.402)
Coup	−1.366***	1.240***	−2.190***	1.712***
	(0.091)	(0.157)	(0.123)	(0.215)
GDP per Capita	−0.003**	−0.010***	−0.003**	−0.010***
	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.002)
Economic Trend	−0.387	−0.569	−0.282	−0.629
	(0.277)	(0.482)	(0.276)	(0.482)
Log Population	0.247***	0.890***	0.262***	0.879***
	(0.072)	(0.126)	(0.072)	(0.126)
Political Violence	0.015	0.044*	0.012	0.046*
	(0.014)	(0.024)	(0.014)	(0.024)
Regime: Military	0.602***	−0.545***	0.574***	−0.584***
	(0.101)	(0.177)	(0.101)	(0.178)
Personal	−0.042	−0.532***	−0.065	−0.526***
	(0.094)	(0.164)	(0.094)	(0.164)
Presidential	−0.576***	0.399**	−0.578***	0.381**
	(0.091)	(0.158)	(0.090)	(0.158)
Parliamentary	−0.475***	0.965***	−0.468***	0.966***
	(0.105)	(0.182)	(0.104)	(0.182)
Other	0.999***	1.094***	1.013***	1.115***
	(0.114)	(0.199)	(0.114)	(0.199)
Cold War	−0.168***	−0.002	−0.156**	−0.011
	(0.064)	(0.111)	(0.063)	(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	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

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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 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 de-

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clines, 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 especially damaging mechanism of democratic backsliding. Their legality-tinged execution obscures their profound institutional consequences, yet their impact is durable, asymmetric, and systematically negative. As autocoups 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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