Prospective Impact of Expected Coup Outcomes on Coup Attempts: A Selection Mechanism Analysis

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Abstract

A substantial body of research has examined coups, with much of it focusing on the factors that lead to coup attempts. However, consensus remains elusive regarding why coups are more prevalent in certain countries while less so in others. Previous scholarship exploring the determinants of coup attempts has often overlooked the crucial aspect of coup success. Given the severe consequences of a failed coup, coup plotters are unlikely to proceed unless they perceive a high chance of success. Thus, the expected outcome of a coup—whether successful or unsuccessful—is not merely incidental but serves as a pivotal determinant of coup attempts. The decision to stage a coup is a self-selected variable contingent upon the anticipated success rate of coups. This study employs a sample selection model (specifically, a two-stage probit model) to elucidate why coups are more common in some autocratic countries but rare in others. I contend that coup attempts are largely shaped by the likelihood of coup success, which, in turn, hinges on the power dynamics between coup perpetrators and incumbents. These power dynamics are influenced by the regime type and their distinct responses to internal and external shocks.

Keywords: Coup, Autocracy, Regime types, Sample selection

1 Introduction

Coups occur with varying frequency across different countries, with some experiencing them more frequently than others. According to the Global Instances of Coups (GIC)[1] dataset (J. M. Powell and Thyne 2011), Latin American countries such as Bolivia witnessed 23 coups between 1950 and 1984, while Argentina experienced 20 during a similar time frame. However, Mexico's authoritarian period from 1917 to 2000 saw no coups at all. In Africa, Sudan endured 17 coups between 1955 and 2023, whereas South Africa has not experienced any coup since 1950. Similar patterns are observed in the Middle East and South Asia. The question of why coups occur more frequently in certain regions, countries, and periods, while being less common in others, has captivated scholars for decades. Consequently, scholars have delved into extensive research on coups. Despite numerous efforts in past studies to shed light on these disparities, a definitive model or set of determinants for analysing coups remains elusive. As highlighted by Gassebner, Gutmann, and Voigt (2016), although approximately one hundred potential determinants of coups have been suggested, the fundamental question remains unanswered.

However, despite extensive research by scholars, the impact of anticipated outcomes on coup initiation has not received sufficient attention. When analysing the determinants of coups, it's crucial not to overlook the most significant characteristic of coups themselves. As noted by J. M. Powell and Thyne (2011), coups are "illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive."(J. M. Powell and Thyne 2011, 252). Due to their illegality, the consequences of a failed coup could be severe, with perpetrators risking imprisonment, exile, or even death. In some instances, the repercussions extend to the families of the coup perpetrators.

Despite the significant risks associated with coups, as shown in Table 1 since 1950, there have still been as many as 491 coups worldwide. Furthermore, more importantly, half of these coups have been successful. At first glance, coups seem to be a high-success-rate, high-reward political venture and speculation. However, compared to over 12,000 country-years since 1950, the occurrence of

[1] https://www.uky.edu/~clthyn2/coup_data/home.htm, accessed on 2024-05-11

491 coups appears rather rare, accounting for less than 4% (J. M. Powell and Thyne 2011).

The low occurrence rate and high success rate indicate that the initiation of coups is highly selective. In other words, the likelihood of a coup occurring depends greatly on its potential success rate. Coup plotters carefully assess their chances before staging a coup. If they decide to proceed, it suggests that the conditions are relatively ripe, hence the fifty-fifty success rate. Plans with immature conditions and low chances of success are automatically filtered out. Fundamentally, launching a coup is not like participating in a general election, where failure in one election allows for another attempt in the next election. A coup is a high-stakes gamble where success brings substantial rewards, while failure may result in martyrdom. Failure, put differently, means permanent and absolute defeat. Furthermore, the outcomes of coups are typically decided within a matter of days, sometimes even mere hours. Unlike prolonged conflicts where victories or defeats may shift over time, the success of a coup is often sealed at its inception. Every detail must be meticulously planned and arranged beforehand.

Hence, the factors influencing the success rates of coups play a significant role in shaping coup attempts. This study employs a sample selection model to examine the factors affecting the success rates of coups and, consequently, the likelihood of coup attempts. I posit that the power dynamics among coup perpetrators, incumbents, and other ruling elites are pivotal in determining the success of coups. These dynamics are largely contingent on regime types, highlighting the pivotal role of regime types in shaping coup attempts.

This study offers two potential contributions to the existing literature: firstly, it highlights the significance of power dynamics within various regime types as critical factors influencing coup attempts; secondly, it demonstrates how sample selection models can enhance our understanding of coup attempts by taking into account the success rates of coups.

Table 1: Top 10 countries with the most coup attempts

Country	Coup Attempted	Coup Succeeded	Success Rate
Bolivia	23	11	47.8%
Argentina	20	7	35.0%
Sudan	17	6	35.3%
Haiti	13	9	69.2%
Venezuela	13	0	0.0%
Iraq	12	4	33.3%
Syria	12	8	66.7%
Thailand	12	8	66.7%
Ecuador	11	5	45.5%
Burundi	11	5	45.5%
Guatemala	10	5	50.0%
Total	491	245	49.9%

Source: GIC dataset

The subsequent section of this paper delves into previous research on coups. Following that, in Part 3, I present the research framework and propose hypotheses. Part 4 provides insights into the data and variables utilized in the study. The testing results are discussed in Part 5, followed by the conclusion in Part 6.

2 Dynamics of coup attempts and outcomes

When contemplating a coup, plotters grapple with two crucial factors that also occupy coup scholars: ***disposition*** (why they take the risk) and ***capability*** (whether they can succeed).

2.1 Disposition: Motivations for Coups

Coup motivations can be categorized into three main types:

Personal Ambition: The allure of absolute power, prestige, and wealth for themselves, family, and close associates is a significant motivator. Wintrobe (2019) distinguishes between totalitarian and tinpot dictators based on their use of power. Totalitarian leaders control every aspect of life, relishing their authority. Tinpot leaders, however, prioritize personal enrichment, indulging in extravagant lifestyles.

Purported National Interest: Sometimes, coups are justified as rescuing a nation in crisis, upholding the constitution, or facilitating a democratic transition. However, scepticism is warranted, as self-serving plotters often use such rhetoric. Nevertheless, legitimate cases exist. In 2010, a coup in Niger ousted President Tandja, who attempted an unconstitutional third term. His actions, including dissolving the opposing Constitutional Court and calling a self-serving referendum, triggered a coup to protect the constitution (Ginsburg and Elkins 2019).

Self-Preservation: In rare instances, coups serve as a last resort against imminent political persecution. Coup leaders might not seek power but fear elimination by the incumbent leader. Consequently, the coup becomes a pre-emptive strike rather than an ambitious power grab. An example is Idi Amin, who, in 1971, staged a coup against Ugandan President Obote, who was attempting to remove Amin from his position as army commander-in-chief (Sudduth 2017).

While these motivations can arise in any regime, autocracies are more susceptible, particularly for the latter two types. Stable democracies rarely face such constitutional crises or political persecutions that necessitate coups to protect them. However, new democracies can be vulnerable to instability, economic downturns, and democratic backsliding which coup plotters can then use as a pretext to justify their actions.

Despite these potential motivations, coups are relatively uncommon, occurring in only 4% of country-years since 1950. This is because even the most determined coup plotters require the capability to succeed, which we will explore in the next section. No rational actor attempts a guaranteed failure.

2.2 Capability

While there may be numerous ambitious political figures vying to seize supreme power for various reasons, only a select few have the opportunity to orchestrate a coup. What truly determines their ability to launch a coup, however, is not merely their willingness, but their capability. Yet, compared to the incumbent, coup plotters naturally face disadvantages.

Firstly, as previously mentioned, coups constitute illegal actions against incumbent leaders. To avoid the severe consequences of exposure or failure, coup plots must remain clandestine within a tightly knit core group. Coup plotters cannot openly recruit supporters to bolster their strength, while incumbents can openly implement coup-proofing strategies to thwart coup attempts.

Secondly, coup plotters are uncertain about how other ruling factions might react to their actions, particularly those capable of altering the balance of power. Conversely, incumbent leaders possess a keen understanding of power dynamics and take proactive measures to tilt the balance in their favour. Though unaware of specific coup instigators, incumbent leaders are keenly aware of potential threats and adapt accordingly to those who possess the capability to challenge them.

Thirdly, coup plotters grapple with a loyalty dilemma and unreliable commitment among participants. The risks involved are considerable, and anticipated benefits are highly uncertain. Even in the event of a successful coup, there is no guarantee that promises made by coup leaders will be honoured. Additionally, post-coup purges often target capable assistants to pre-empt future challenges. Consequently, defecting to support the incumbent leader seems less risky and offers a safer bet with predictable rewards.

Given these challenges, rational coup plotters are unlikely to risk their lives for a coup with low odds of success. Instead, they may opt to abandon their plans or bide their time until success becomes more feasible. Therefore, when coup perpetrators decide to take action, they must have meticulously assessed their chances of success and deemed the risk worthwhile.

But what constitutes a ‘good enough’ chance of success for coup plotters to proceed? Before delving into a theoretical framework to analyze this question, let’s first examine historical data to gain a rough idea. Surprisingly, previous coups since 1950 suggest a rather satisfactory success

rate, nearly 50%, as depicted in Table 1.

2.3 Framework of coup success

An oft-cited framework, formalized by Leon (2013a) and Aidt and Leon (2019), provides a structured approach to assess the disposition and capability of coup attempts by evaluating the anticipated benefits for coup plotters. This framework can be represented by the equation:

$$\text{Expected Payoff of coups} = \sigma V_S + (1-\sigma)(V_I - C) \tag{1}$$

Here, V_S represents the return of a successful coup, V_I denotes the normal value paid by the incumbent in the status quo, C signifies the cost of a failed coup, and σ represents the probability of coup success. The condition for staging a coup is when the expected benefit is positive, meaning that the expected pay-off is greater than 0. Rearranging and simplifying the equation, we get:

$$\sigma[V_S - V_I] > (1-\sigma)C \tag{2}$$

Equation 2 implies that for Equation 1 to hold, the expected benefits earned from successful coups must outweigh the expected cost of failed coups. Both the motivation (disposition) and chance of success (capability) are embedded within Equation 2. The motivation is reflected by the difference in benefits ($V_S - V_I$), while the opportunity is represented by the probability of success (σ).

While seemingly clear, the equation faces practical challenges. Quantifying V_S (the value of a successful coup) and C (the cost of failure) is difficult. The loss of life, freedom, or loved ones after a failed coup, as well as the value of assuming leadership after a successful coup, are intangible concepts that defy precise measurement. As evidenced by the 1979 coup in Ghana[2], the fate of the coup leader(s) hangs in the balance; they are high likely to be killed if the coup fails, or to execute

[2]In the case of the Ghanaian coup, flight lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings narrowly avoided execution after his initial failure, being freed by mutinous soldiers. Three weeks later, following Rawlings' successful overthrow of the government, the deposed leader, General Fred Akuffo, was executed along with many other senior members of his government.

others if the coup succeeds (Aidt and Leon 2019).

However, these challenges do not render the framework useless. Firstly, its core logic remains valuable, offering insights into how coup plotters might assess the return and cost of their actions. Secondly, given the significant and elusive nature of precise values for V_S and C, they can be treated as roughly equal. Consequently, there is no need to fret over how to measure and compare these values precisely. Instead, we can shift our focus from V_S and C to the probability of success (σ), simplifying Equation 2 to:

$$\sigma > (1 - \sigma) \tag{3}$$

Equation 3 suggests that, to hold Equation 2 true, a success probability greater than 50% is necessary. Interestingly, empirical data on coups since 1950 somewhat supports this notion. As shown in Table 1, the overall success rate is 49.9%. While this falls short of the 50% threshold, it's important to consider two factors. Firstly, this is an average rate, not necessarily reflective of the probabilities assessed by coup plotters beforehand. Secondly, outliers such as irrational actors and coups driven by self-preservation may not prioritize success probabilities. Taking these points into account, we can propose our first hypothesis:

> ***H1: The primary determinant of a coup attempt is the perceived chance of success. Coup plotters likely require a success threshold of at least*** 50%**.**

This leads us to the next crucial question: what factors determine a coup's success, influencing the very decision to attempt one? While specifics may vary, the core element hinges on the power dynamic between coup plotters and the incumbent leaders. Logically, the more powerful entity holds a greater advantage in this high-stakes struggle for control.

2.4 Regime types and power dynamics

When discussing the balance of power, the first aspect that comes to mind is military strength. It's evident that control over the military gives individuals the upper hand in coup attempts. This ex-

plains why military coups are often at the forefront of political science discussions. In much of the literature on coups, the terms "coup" and "military coup" are used interchangeably, with little exploration into why this is the case. Consequently, more attention is directed towards preventing military involvement in politics. Strategies such as "*Keeping the military happy*" (Aidt and Leon 2019, 15) or "*giving them toys*" (Huntington 1991, 252) have been proposed to mitigate military intervention. Many coup-proofing strategies, informed by empirical research, aim to either diminish the military's inclination to stage coups or create obstacles to their success. For example, studies by Leon (2013b) suggest that nations with lower military spending as a percentage of GDP are more susceptible to coups. Similarly, J. Powell et al. (2018) argues that increased military expenditures may reduce the likelihood of coups among military factions.

However, previous studies have often oversimplified the intricate balance of power within military forces. They have frequently assumed, without substantial evidence, that the military operates as a monolithic entity, uniformly and decisively. Such a notion fails to capture the complexities of real-world dynamics.

It is crucial to acknowledge that the military is not always a unified entity. Regardless of its size, any military force is composed of various groups or factions, each with its own chain of command. Within these factions, mutual suspicion, competition, and vigilance are common, while moments of unity are rare. Due to the clandestine nature of coups and the need for secrecy, coup attempts are often orchestrated within small, tight-knit groups. Coup plotters are uncertain about the stances and intentions of other factions beforehand, and they are particularly worried that once the coup is initiated, other factions may not only refuse to support it but also actively oppose, intervene in, or even suppress it. Therefore, the success of a coup heavily depends on the reactions of other military factions (Geddes 1999).

Furthermore, the structure of military forces, especially their relationships with other state departments, particularly civilian officials, varies across different regime types. In democratic countries, the military is nationalized and bound by constitutional authority rather than individual leaders. For instance, the United States Armed Forces are under the command of the President but remain

loyal to the Constitution, refraining from intervening in politics. In military regimes, power is often centralized in the hands of top generals or a junta, while in personal dictatorships, the leader retains ultimate authority over the military. In dominant-party regimes, the military serves the interests of the ruling party. Thus, the balance of power within military forces is deeply influenced by the nature of the regime in question.

To gain a thorough understanding of military power dynamics across diverse political landscapes, it is imperative to explore their intricate nuances. This section adopts the foundational concepts articulated by Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2014) (GWF), which categorize regimes based on the origins of their leadership and the factors influencing their policy decisions. These regimes are broadly classified into four categories: military regimes, personalist regimes (including monarchies), dominant-party regimes, and democratic regimes.

Military regimes, as defined by GWF, are characterized by the dominance of a junta composed of military officers who exercise control over the regime's power structure, including leadership selection and policy formulation. Examples of such regimes include the Brazilian regime (1964–1985), the Argentine regime (1976–1983), and the Salvadoran regime (1948–1984) (Geddes 1999). It's noteworthy that within military regimes, political parties may persist, but they typically serve as conduits for the military junta or align with the directives of military officers to avoid being categorized as dominant-party regimes. Additionally, while a junta may appoint a senior officer as the executive or enlist civilian administrators and technocrats as intermediaries, their authority over other officers remains restricted, distinguishing military regimes from personalist ones.

In a typical **personalist regime**, supreme power rests with the dictator, encompassing policy making, control over the military, and the authority to nominate top officials and successors. Personalist rules often emerge under charismatic leaders, particularly founding fathers of newly independent nations. Regimes such as Rafael Trujillo's in the Dominican Republic (1930–1961), Idi Amin's in Uganda (1971–1979), and Jean-Bédel Bokassa's in the Central African Republic (1966–1979) serve as illustrative examples of personalist rule (Geddes 1999). In such regimes, either political parties are absent or they are established by or subservient to the dictator. Importantly, the

dictator may or may not be a military officer themselves, but the military is invariably under the dictator's control.

In a typical **dominant-party regime**, supreme power lies within the party, with the incumbent serving as its representative and subject to collective party leadership. Examples of dominant-party regimes include the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in Mexico, the Revolutionary Party of Tanzania (CCM), and Leninist parties in various East European countries (Geddes 1999). The party functions as a well-organized and highly disciplined entity, with its own ideology and political agenda to unite and mobilize its members and supporters. While powerful leaders may emerge within such regimes, such as Stalin in the Soviet Union (1924-1953 and Mao Zedong in China (1949-1976), they do not wield enough power to supplant or replace the party with a new one.

Table 2: Regime types and their distribution since 1950

Regime Type	Counts	Share
Democracy	5440	46.1%
Dominant-Party	2612	22.1%
Personal	1552	13.2%
Monarchy	1058	9.0%
Military	729	6.2%
Other	404	3.4%
Total	11795	100%

Source: REIGN dataset

3 Research Framework and Hypotheses

4 Data and Variables

5 Results and Discussion

6 Conclusion

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