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

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Abstract

This thesis addresses a significant gap in the study of irregular leadership transitions by systematically incorporating autocoups—events in which incumbent leaders extend their constitutionally mandated term, either through legal manipulation or overtly illegal means. It refines the conceptual definition of autocoups by resolving existing ambiguities, thereby aligning them more closely with traditional coup frameworks. Based on this refined definition, the thesis introduces a novel global dataset of autocoup events from 1945 to 2023, encompassing 109 documented cases, 87 of which were successful.

Leveraging this dataset, the study undertakes a large-N empirical analysis to explore the structural determinants of autocoups. It finds that personalist regimes are significantly more prone to employing autocoups as a means of power retention compared to other autocratic subtypes. The analysis then turns to leadership survival, employing survival analysis techniques to compare the political longevity of leaders installed via classic coups with those who extended power through autocoups. The findings reveal that coup-installed leaders are 2.23 times more likely to be forcibly removed from office than autocoup leaders. On average, autocoup leaders enjoy post-event tenures approximately five years longer than their coup-installed counterparts.

The thesis also evaluates the broader institutional implications of these power seizures, particularly their impact on democratization. Using Polity scores as a proxy for democratic quality and applying a country-fixed effects model, the analysis shows that autocoups are associated with a steady decline in democratic institutions both before and after their occurrence. In contrast, traditional coups often produce a sharp initial decline in democratic quality, but may be

followed by partial recovery over time.

Together, these findings underscore the distinct trajectories and consequences of coups and autocoups. This research makes several important contributions: it clarifies the conceptual boundaries of autocoups, offers a new empirical foundation for their study, and provides robust comparative insights into how different modes of irregular power transition affect leadership survival and institutional development. The implications are substantial for both academic inquiry and policy-making, particularly in the context of global democratic backsliding and the resilience of political institutions.

Keywords: *Coups, Autocoups, Leadership transitions, Leadership survival, Democratic resilience*

Chapter 1

Introduction

At the heart of contemporary political dynamics lies a fundamental question: *Why are some political leaders prematurely removed from power, while others succeed in extending their tenure beyond constitutional limits?* Furthermore, *how does the manner of their survival or ouster shape political stability and democratic institutions?* This thesis seeks to address these pressing questions by analysing the structural and strategic underpinnings of irregular leadership transitions.

1.1 Motivations

The stability and resilience of political systems depend heavily on the orderly transfer of power. When leadership transitions occur within established institutional frameworks, they reinforce legitimacy and bolster regime durability. In contrast, the breakdown of conventional mechanisms for political succession often leads to instability, violence, and institutional erosion. Among the most disruptive of these breakdowns are irregular leadership transitions, which cast long institutional shadows and fundamentally reshape the political trajectory of regimes. Understanding the causes and consequences of such events remains a central concern in the study of political order and regime change.

Extant literature identifies a range of catalysts for irregular leadership exits, including civil wars (Kokkonen and Sundell 2019), international conflict (Mesquita and Siverson 1995), ethnic tensions (Londregan, Bienen, and Walle 1995), economic downturns (Miller 2012; Krishnarajan 2019), and natural disasters (Quiroz Flores and Smith 2012). Among these, coups d'état stand out as perhaps the most consequential, given both their frequency and their direct targeting of incumbents. In autocracies, coups are responsible for nearly one-third of all leadership exits—surpassing regular transitions, which account for just over one-fifth (Frantz and Stein 2016). Moreover, over 63% of non-constitutional removals in dictatorships result from coups (Svolik 2009).

As a result, coups have received substantial scholarly attention. A robust body of literature examines their causes, outcomes, and long-term impacts on democracy and development (Thyne and Powell 2019). Scholars have proposed nearly one hundred potential determinants of coups, yet consensus on a baseline explanatory model remains elusive (Gassebner, Gutmann, and Voigt 2016).

By contrast, another form of irregular power transition remains comparatively neglected in the literature: the autocoup. In this phenomenon, an incumbent leader extends their tenure by circumventing or violating constitutional term limits—either through legal manipulation or overtly illegal acts. While autocoups do not involve immediate leadership change, they constitute a profound disruption of institutional succession norms and thwart expected transitions of power. As such, they should be understood as a critical, albeit underexamined, variant of irregular leadership transition.

This thesis contends that autocoups warrant systematic analysis alongside traditional coups within a unified analytical framework. Despite their distinct mechanisms, both coups and autocoups represent extra-constitutional attempts to retain or seize power, and both can produce profound consequences for leadership survival, regime durability, and institutional integrity. Comparing these two forms of irregular transitions can illuminate shared drivers, divergent consequences, and implications for democratic resilience.

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The urgency of this research is underscored by the severe risks associated with irregular transitions. Coups and autocoups alike can spark immediate crises—ranging from institutional paralysis to civil conflict—and leave long-lasting institutional scars. More fundamentally, they often dismantle constitutional checks, disrupt electoral processes, and accelerate democratic erosion or authoritarian entrenchment.

Historical examples highlight these dangers vividly. Ghana's turbulent period from 1979 to 1984 exemplifies the destabilizing effects of classic coups: following Jerry Rawlings's 1979 coup, eight individuals, including three former heads of state, were executed (Pieterse 1982). Rawlings staged another coup in 1981 and subsequently suppressed three further coup attempts (Haynes 2022). In contrast, the 1992 autocoup in Peru by President Alberto Fujimori demonstrates how incumbents can dismantle democratic institutions without leadership change: Fujimori dissolved Congress, suspended the constitution, and ruled by decree (Mauceri 1995; Maxwell A. Cameron 1998b).

These patterns are increasingly relevant in today's global political context. According to Freedom House's Freedom in the World 2024 report, global political rights and civil liberties declined for the 18th consecutive year in 2023, with setbacks in 52 countries and improvements in only 21 (Freedom House 2024). The persistence of democratic erosion underscores the urgent need to understand the mechanisms that facilitate it—including both coups and autocoups.

This thesis aims to advance theoretical and empirical understanding of irregular leadership transitions, offering insights with significant implications for both academic scholarship and policy-making in fragile and transitioning regimes.

1.2   Research objectives and contributions

To address the pressing challenges posed by irregular leadership transitions, this study undertakes a comprehensive comparative analysis guided by four core research objectives. First, to refine the conceptual definition of autocoups and introduce a novel global dataset suitable for

large-N empirical analysis. Second, to identify the structural and institutional determinants of autocoups through systematic quantitative investigation. Third, to compare the survival prospects of leaders who come to power through traditional coups with those who extend their tenure via autocoups. Finally, to assess the divergent impacts of coups and autocoups on democratization trajectories and the resilience of political institutions.

By examining both coups and autocoups from 1950 to 2023, this thesis addresses a significant gap in political science by developing and applying a unified analytical framework to treat these events as distinct yet interrelated forms of extra-constitutional power transitions. Through this lens, the study makes four key contributions to the literature on leadership dynamics, regime stability, and institutional development.

Conceptual Clarification and Empirical Foundation for Autocoups

The thesis advances conceptual clarity by situating autocoups within the broader typology of irregular power transitions. It offers a refined definition of autocoups—centred on the extension of tenure—and distinguishes them from both legal executive aggrandizement and traditional coups. Based on this reconceptualization, the study introduces a novel global dataset of autocoups spanning from 1945 to 2023, documenting 109 events, of which 87 were successful. This dataset addresses a long-standing empirical deficit and provides the foundational basis for systematic comparative analysis, enabling further research into a previously understudied form of institutional disruption.

Determinants of Autocoups

Drawing on this new dataset, the thesis conducts an empirical analysis of the conditions under which autocoups are likely to occur. It finds that leaders operating within personalist regimes are significantly more prone to extending their tenure through autocoups than their counterparts in other autocratic configurations. These findings contribute to the literature on regime type

and irregular power retention, shedding light on how institutional structure influences leaders' strategic decisions to subvert term limits.

Quantifying the Impact of Transition Type on Leader Longevity

This research contributes to the study of leadership survival by comparing tenure lengths of leaders who seize power via coups with those who entrench themselves through autocoups. Employing survival analysis on both coup and autocoup datasets, the study demonstrates that the method of power acquisition is a significant predictor of leadership duration. Specifically, leaders installed through coups are 2.23 times more likely to be forcibly removed than autocoup leaders, who on average serve five years longer following the event. These findings underscore the importance of power transition mode in shaping regime durability and elite turnover.

Disaggregating the Institutional Consequences of Irregular Transitions

The thesis further explores how different types of irregular transitions affect democratic institutions. Using country-fixed effects regression models and Polity scores as a measure of democratic quality, it finds that autocoups are consistently associated with gradual and sustained democratic decline—both before and after the event. In contrast, coups produce more varied institutional outcomes: although they often cause immediate setbacks to democratic norms, in some cases they allow for subsequent democratic recovery. This disaggregation reveals distinct regime trajectories and institutional consequences stemming from the two forms of power seizure.

Collectively, these contributions offer a more nuanced and empirically grounded understanding of irregular leadership transitions. By conceptualizing coups and autocoups within a shared analytical framework, providing original data, and conducting rigorous comparative analyses, this thesis enhances our knowledge of how and why leaders subvert institutional norms—and with what consequences. The findings hold important implications for both aca-

demic theory and contemporary policymaking, particularly in contexts marked by democratic fragility, elite opportunism, and institutional decay.

1.3 Policy implications

While scholarly debate continues over the potential for coups to inadvertently catalyze democratization in certain contexts (C. L. Thyne and Powell 2014; Derpanopoulos et al. 2016; Miller 2016), a strong policy consensus holds that coups are inherently illegitimate mechanisms for political change. As violent disruptions of constitutional order, they tend to inflict immediate institutional damage, generate instability, and usher in unpredictable political trajectories. Consequently, international and domestic policy responses have rightly prioritized prevention—most notably through "coup-proofing" strategies aimed at insulating regimes from military intervention or elite defection (Quinlivan 1999; Pilster and Böhmelt 2012; Jonathan M. Powell, n.d.; Albrecht 2014a; Carey, Colaresi, and Mitchell 2015; C. S. Brown, Fariss, and McMahon 2015; Sudduth 2017). Yet these approaches have well-documented limitations (Albrecht 2014b; Reiter 2020), and as this thesis demonstrates, deeper structural power dynamics within regimes are often the most decisive factors in shaping vulnerability to both coups and autocoups.

From this perspective, the study's findings yield several important policy implications.

The first and most direct implication concerns the design of political institutions. Regimes that feature robust horizontal accountability mechanisms—such as independent legislatures, judiciaries, and oversight bodies—are inherently more resilient to irregular power seizures. A well-calibrated balance of power reduces both the opportunity and incentive for executive actors to bypass constitutional constraints. Institutional designs that disperse authority, limit executive overreach, and embed strong checks and balances can therefore serve as a first line of defense against both coups and autocoups. Supporting good governance practices that prevent excessive power concentration—through constitutional term limits, civil society engagement, and transparent succession rules—is essential to reducing the risks of authoritarian entrench-

ment.

A second major policy implication lies in the role of external actors and international institutions. Regional and global organizations—such as MERCOSUR, the Organization of American States (OAS), the African Union (AU), ECOWAS, the European Union, and the Council of Europe—have played important roles in deterring unconstitutional leadership changes. By establishing legal frameworks that mandate democratic governance and deploying tools like sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and suspension of membership, these bodies can exert pressure on regimes that emerge from military coups or other overt violations of constitutional norms (Wobig 2014; Shannon et al. 2014; C. Thyne et al. 2017).

However, the effectiveness of these mechanisms is often limited when dealing with autocoups. Unlike traditional coups, autocoups are typically executed through procedural manipulations—such as emergency decrees, manipulated referenda, or constitutional revisions—rather than overt military force. This legalistic veneer complicates international responses: the absence of visible violence or abrupt leadership change frequently leads to delayed or diluted intervention, hindered by political ambiguity and lack of consensus.

Given the rising incidence of autocoups since the early 2000s and their central role in democratic backsliding (Bermeo 2016; Mechkova, Lührmann, and Lindberg 2017), international actors must adapt their monitoring and response frameworks accordingly. A third policy recommendation is therefore clear: international and regional organizations must shift from reactive to proactive approaches, developing criteria that capture gradual institutional erosion—a hallmark of modern authoritarian consolidation. Rather than waiting for clear-cut disruptions, policymakers should employ existing democratic monitoring tools—such as Polity scores, Freedom House ratings, and V-Dem indices—to track sustained declines in institutional quality, media freedom, judicial independence, and electoral competitiveness. When patterns of democratic regression emerge, they should serve as early warning signals, prompting calibrated responses: diplomatic pressure, conditional aid adjustments, public condemnation, or even targeted sanctions. This would allow the international community to act before constitutional structures are

fully hollowed out.

In sum, this thesis underscores that modern threats to democracy are increasingly procedural rather than violent, and policy responses must evolve accordingly. While coups remain a clear and present danger to political order, autocoups pose a subtler but equally corrosive threat—eroding democracy from within rather than toppling it outright. To preserve constitutional governance in an era of creeping authoritarianism, both domestic institutions and international frameworks must be retooled to detect and resist the slow unraveling of democratic norms, not just their sudden collapse.

1.4   Limitations and future research

While this study offers a novel analytical framework for understanding coups and autocoups, their effects on leadership survival, and their broader institutional implications, several limitations suggest important avenues for future research and refinement.

First, although the definition and classification of autocoups presented here represent a significant conceptual advance, broader scholarly consensus on these parameters remains underdeveloped. Both the definitional boundaries and the empirical dataset introduced in this study serve as foundational contributions, yet they are necessarily provisional. Future research should aim to further elaborate and refine these components to enhance the reliability and comparability of findings across studies.

A central challenge lies in the conceptual ambiguity surrounding the very definition of autocoups—particularly in borderline cases where incumbents extend power through legal or quasi-legal means. Future work could investigate the normative and analytical trade-offs involved in including such cases within the autocoup category. Comparative analyses of "legal" versus "extra-legal" tenure extensions may help clarify whether these phenomena should be treated as variants of autocoups or as distinct processes altogether.

This definitional ambiguity directly impacts dataset construction. Minor adjustments in

inclusion criteria can substantially alter the number and classification of identified cases, particularly where intentions, timing, and legal interpretation are contested. A useful illustrative example is the case of President Manuel Zelaya of Honduras in 2009. Zelaya proposed a referendum to amend the 1965 Constitution, which banned re-election, ostensibly to allow future leaders to seek another term. The referendum was scheduled for the same day as the national presidential election, meaning that even if it had passed, Zelaya would not have immediately benefited. However, questions remain about his underlying intent: by proposing a reform that appeared to exclude him, Zelaya may have been attempting to build public support for a subsequent reinterpretation or amendment to extend his own rule. Ultimately, he was ousted in a military coup, triggering a profound constitutional crisis (Muñoz-Portillo and Treminio 2019). This example illustrates the analytical complexity of identifying autocoups and the importance of improving coding criteria and interpretive clarity in future datasets.

Accordingly, both the conceptual framework and empirical foundation introduced in this study would benefit from continued theoretical debate and methodological refinement. Several promising research directions follow.

Given the long-term decline in traditional coups and the concurrent rise of autocoups, intensified scholarly focus on the latter is essential. While this study centres on tenure extensions as the defining feature of autocoups, broader forms of executive power expansion—whether within or beyond constitutional limits—warrant further scrutiny. These dynamics are both frequent and damaging to institutional integrity, yet remain insufficiently explored in comparative politics. To capture the full spectrum of these behaviors, the development of a dedicated dataset on power expansions is a critical next step.

Moreover, as the incidence of overt and dramatic regime changes has decreased since the early 2000s, so too has the number of clean transitions between democracy and autocracy. This trend underscores the need for more sensitive measurement tools that can detect incremental shifts within regimes. Future empirical work should focus on capturing these subtler transformations, such as small but sustained changes in Polity scores or other fine-grained institutional

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indicators. Doing so will enable scholars to better track the slow erosion or recovery of democratic governance in contexts where abrupt transitions are no longer the norm.

1.5 Overview of the thesis

This thesis investigates the complex power dynamics inherent in **coups and autocoups**, focusing on their consequences for leadership survival and the institutional integrity of political regimes. It develops a unified analytical framework to analyze these phenomena as distinct yet interrelated forms of irregular power transitions. Each chapter contributes to this overarching inquiry by offering conceptual refinements, empirical innovations, and comparative insights.

Chapter 2: Conceptualising autocoups and data introduction

Despite the increasing prevalence of autocoups—particularly in the post–Cold War period—their systematic study remains underdeveloped. Existing scholarship suffers from conceptual fragmentation, with a proliferation of overlapping and inconsistently defined terms ("self-coup," "autogolpe," "executive aggrandizement," etc.) (Marsteintredet and Malamud 2019; Baturo and Tolstrup 2022). This ambiguity complicates data collection and analysis, as many datasets fail to distinguish between tenure extension and other forms of executive power consolidation—an essential distinction for this study. Consequently, methodological progress has been constrained, with most studies relying on qualitative case analyses (Maxwell A. Cameron 1998b; Antonio 2021; Pion-Berlin, Bruneau, and Goetze 2022) rather than much-needed large-N approaches.

This chapter addresses these shortcomings by offering a more precise and theoretically grounded definition of the autocoup. It argues that autocoups should be defined as instances where incumbents extend their constitutionally mandated terms through legal manipulation or overtly illegal means. By centering the concept on tenure extension, the definition excludes broader forms of executive aggrandizement that occur within constitutional timeframes and

aligns autocoups conceptually with classic coups, both of which involve a disruption of consti-
tutionally prescribed leadership succession.

Based on this refined definition, the chapter introduces a major empirical contribution: a
newly compiled global dataset of autocoups spanning from 1945 to 2023, identifying 109 dis-
tinct events, of which 87 were successful. This dataset enables robust quantitative analysis and
opens new avenues for comparative research on irregular power retention.

Chapter 3: Determinants of autocoup attempts

Due to long-standing conceptual and empirical limitations, previous discussions of autocoups
have relied predominantly on case studies (Baturo and Elgie, n.d.; Marsteintredet and Malamud
2019; Baturo and Tolstrup 2022). The dataset introduced in Chapter 2 enables, for the first time,
large-N analysis of the structural conditions associated with autocoup attempts.

Drawing on insights from coup literature, this chapter examines a range of potential
predictors—including economic performance, succession rules, military variables, protest
levels, and media freedom. While these variables have been explored in the context of
traditional coups, they often fail to account for persistent variation across regime types or
explain the limited success of "coup-proofing" strategies (Albrecht 2014b; Reiter 2020).
Additionally, studies that incorporate regime type often rely on overly simplistic dichotomies
(e.g., democracy vs. autocracy, or civilian vs. military), obscuring important variation within
autocratic subtypes (Hiroi and Omori 2013; Schiel 2019).

This chapter proposes that autocoup risk is fundamentally shaped by the structural balance
of power inherent in a regime's foundational type. Specifically, the likelihood of an autocoup
depends on the equilibrium between incumbent leaders and potential institutional challengers—
a balance largely locked in at regime inception (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014). To test this,
the chapter utilizes regime typologies as proxies for internal power configurations.

Employing a probit model, the analysis finds that personalist regimes exhibit a significantly

higher likelihood of autocoup attempts, even when controlling for other variables. Leaders in dominant-party and military regimes, by contrast, do not differ significantly from democratic leaders in their propensity to attempt an autocoup. These findings underscore the importance of regime structure in shaping strategic decisions around irregular tenure extension.

Chapter 4: Power acquisition methods and leadership Survival

A substantial literature has examined the tenure survival of leaders who rise to power via coups (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Sudduth 2017; Easton and Siverson 2018), yet the absence of a comparable dataset on autocoups has historically prevented rigorous comparison between coup-installed leaders and those who extend their rule through autocoups. This chapter closes that gap by conducting the first comparative survival analysis of these two categories within a unified theoretical framework.

The chapter argues that leaders who seize power through classic coups face heightened legitimacy deficits, political uncertainty, and immediate institutional instability, in contrast to autocoup leaders, who maintain institutional continuity while neutralizing constraints. These differences shape divergent paths to power consolidation.

Using Cox proportional hazards and time-dependent Cox models, the study finds that leaders installed via coups are, on average, 2.23 times more likely to be forcibly removed from office than those who extend their tenure through autocoups. Moreover, autocoup leaders enjoy, on average, five additional years in power post-event. These findings offer a compelling explanation for the rising prevalence of autocoups and the relative decline of classic coups, particularly since the early 2000s.

Chapter 5: Coups, autocoups, and democracy

While the impact of coups on democratization has been the subject of extensive research (Clayton and Onwumechili 2000; Jonathan M. Powell 2014; C. Thyne and Hitch 2020), the effects

of autocoups remain underexplored due to the historical lack of relevant data. This chapter addresses that gap through a quantitative analysis of how coups and autocoups affect democratic institutions.

Unlike coups, which may result in leadership change or regime transition, autocoups typically involve incumbents dismantling institutional constraints without changing the ruling coalition. As such, their impacts are evaluated not through regime-type shifts but via changes in Polity scores, which provide a continuous measure of democratic quality.

Two key arguments are advanced. First, leaders often begin undermining institutional checks in anticipation of an autocoup, leading to declines in Polity scores even before the event. Second, while coups generate mixed democratic outcomes—occasionally enabling transitions—autocoups almost uniformly result in democratic erosion or deeper authoritarian consolidation.

The empirical analysis, using a country-fixed effects model, confirms that autocoups correlate with consistent declines in democratic quality both before and after their occurrence. In contrast, coups often produce an immediate drop in Polity scores, though some regimes subsequently recover. These findings demonstrate that autocoups pose a uniquely insidious threat to democracy, often proceeding incrementally and under a guise of legality.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and future research directions

The final chapter synthesizes the findings of the preceding chapters, highlighting the structural, strategic, and institutional forces that shape irregular leadership transitions. It emphasizes that coups and autocoups are not merely disruptive events, but strategic tools wielded by political elites to recalibrate or entrench their power. Their institutional legacies diverge: while coups often destabilize regimes, autocoups tend to consolidate authoritarian rule.

The chapter identifies key implications for understanding the resilience of autocracy, the fragility of democratic institutions, and the strategic behavior of leaders under threat. It also

lays out several avenues for future research.

First, the broader phenomenon of executive power expansion—whether or not it involves tenure extension—warrants systematic study. Given its growing frequency and corrosive institutional impact, the development of a dedicated dataset on power expansions is recommended.

Second, as full regime transitions become less common, future research should focus on detecting subtle changes in political quality. Fine-grained tools—such as small shifts in Polity scores—will be increasingly important for tracking democratic backsliding and recovery within hybrid or semi-authoritarian regimes.

Chapter 2

Autocoups: Conceptual Clarification of Power Extensions by Incumbent Leaders

Abstract

This chapter introduces a refined conceptualization of **autocoups**, defined as instances in which incumbent leaders extend their constitutionally mandated tenure by circumventing or violating term limits—either through legal manipulation or overtly illegal means. By critically reviewing and synthesizing overlapping terms such as *self-coup*, *autogolpe*, and *executive takeover*, the chapter clarifies the boundaries of the concept, emphasizing its defining feature: the extension of leadership tenure. In distinguishing autocoups from broader and more ambiguous forms of executive aggrandizement, this chapter presents a more analytically precise framework for studying irregular power extensions. Building on this conceptual foundation, it introduces a novel global dataset of autocoup events spanning 1945 to 2023, thereby enabling systematic, large-N analysis of this increasingly salient form of authoritarian consolidation.

keywords: *Autocoups, Coups, Irregular Power Transitions, Leadership Tenure, Dataset*

2.1 Introduction

The stability and resilience of political systems fundamentally depend on the orderly transfer of power. When leadership successions occur within established constitutional frameworks, they reinforce the legitimacy and durability of governing institutions. Conversely, when the norms and mechanisms governing succession break down, they often trigger political violence, institutional decay, and long-term instability.

In political practice, while many leadership transitions proceed smoothly, a significant number do not. In particular, authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes frequently witness two types of irregular leadership outcomes: the premature removal of incumbents, and the illegitimate extension of power beyond constitutional limits.

The former—forced removals of leaders before their terms expire—has been extensively studied under the broader category of irregular leadership transitions. These events cast long shadows, with profound consequences for regime stability, democratic legitimacy, and institutional development. As such, understanding the causes and consequences of irregular transitions remains central to political science.

Extant literature identifies a range of triggers for these disruptions, including civil war (Kokkonen and Sundell 2019), international conflict (Mesquita and Siverson 1995), ethnic divisions (Londregan, Bienen, and Walle 1995), poor economic performance (Miller 2012; Krishnarajan 2019), and natural disasters (Quiroz Flores and Smith 2012). Among these, however, coups d'état stand out as the most frequent and consequential cause of leadership change— especially in autocracies, where they account for roughly one-third of all leader exits, surpassing even regular transitions (Frantz and Stein 2016). In fact, over 63% of non-constitutional removals in dictatorships are the result of coups (Svolik 2009).

Defined as illegal and overt attempts by the military or state elites to unseat a sitting executive (Powell and Thyne 2011), coups have attracted extensive scholarly attention. The literature has explored their structural and immediate causes, their aftermath, and their effects on demo-

cratic consolidation and economic development (Thyne and Powell 2019). However, this focus on traditional coups risks overlooking a distinct but increasingly significant form of irregular transition: the autocoup.

An autocoup, as defined in this chapter, refers to an incumbent leader extending their tenure by subverting or bypassing constitutional term limits—either through legal manipulation (such as judicial reinterpretation or referenda) or clearly illegal means (such as emergency decrees). Despite their growing frequency—particularly since the end of the Cold War—autocoups remain understudied. The field suffers from conceptual fragmentation, with a proliferation of overlapping and inconsistently applied terms such as self-coup, autogolpe, and executive aggrandizement (Marsteintredet and Malamud 2019; Baturo and Tolstrup 2022). This ambiguity hampers both definitional clarity and reliable data collection. Existing datasets, while valuable, often conflate tenure extensions with other forms of executive power consolidation, thus failing to capture the specific dynamics this study seeks to analyze (Baturo and Tolstrup 2022). These conceptual and empirical gaps have, in turn, led to a reliance on qualitative case studies (Maxwell A. Cameron 1998b; Antonio 2021; Pion-Berlin, Bruneau, and Goetze 2022) at the expense of broader comparative insights.

This chapter argues that such limitations obscure a crucial dimension of contemporary authoritarianism and proposes a unified framework for analysing coups and autocoups together as distinct but comparable strategies for undermining constitutional norms governing leadership succession. This comparative approach is justified on three grounds.

First, both coups and autocoups constitute fundamental breaches of constitutional order, with significant implications for democratic resilience, political legitimacy, and institutional integrity. Analyzing them in tandem allows for a systematic exploration of how different modes of irregular power transition shape political development and democratization trajectories.

Second, although both disrupt established norms of succession, they operate in opposite directions relative to the incumbent: while coups forcibly truncate an incumbent's tenure, autocoups unlawfully extend it. This contrast—between the premature termination and the prolon-

gation of rule—provides a compelling lens through which to examine the divergent mechanisms of authoritarian survival and entrenchment.

Third, this comparative lens helps illuminate key contemporary puzzles. For instance, how can the decline in coup frequency since the 1990s (Bermeo 2016) be reconciled with the ongoing erosion of democratic governance, now in its 18th consecutive year of global decline (Freedom House 2024)? By including autocoups in the analytical framework, this research highlights the growing importance of incremental, procedural subversions of democracy, often spearheaded by incumbents from within the existing legal architecture.

In addressing these gaps, this chapter contributes in two principal ways. First, it provides conceptual clarification by redefining autocoups as a subtype of irregular power transitions explicitly centered on unconstitutional tenure extension. This definitional clarity distinguishes autocoups from broader executive aggrandizement. Second, it introduces a new global dataset of autocoup events from 1945 to 2023, compiled according to this refined conceptualization, enabling systematic quantitative analysis for the first time.

The remainder of the chapter is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews existing definitions related to power extension and executive aggrandizement, culminating in a refined conceptualization of autocoups. Section 3 introduces the newly compiled global dataset of autocoup events, outlining its scope, coding criteria, and methodological foundations. Section 4 provides an initial exploration of the dataset through descriptive statistics and illustrative case studies. The conclusion synthesizes the chapter's key contributions and proposes avenues for future research.

2.2   literature review and clarification of definitions

A key limitation in the study of irregular leadership transitions is the lack of integration between research on classic coups and autocoups. Although both represent critical mechanisms of extra-constitutional power change, they have typically been studied in isolation, with limited attention

to their conceptual and empirical intersections.

This divide stems primarily from two factors: the historical underrecognition of autocoups as a distinct subtype of irregular transition, and the persistent conceptual ambiguity surrounding their definition. While classic coups are marked by the abrupt removal of incumbents, autocoups generally refer to incumbent-led efforts to expand or extend power by circumventing constitutional constraints. Yet the inconsistent use of overlapping terms—such as self-coup, autogolpe, and executive aggrandizement—has further obscured these distinctions.

Clarifying the definition of autocoups is therefore a crucial first step toward building a comparative framework capable of capturing the full spectrum of irregular power transitions. This section undertakes that task by distinguishing autocoups from broader forms of executive power consolidation and aligning them conceptually with traditional coups through their shared violation of constitutional norms.

Terminology

Existing studies that examine autocoups employ a range of terms to describe the expansion of power or extension of tenure by incumbent leaders. The most commonly used term is 'self-coup', or autogolpe in Spanish (Przeworski et al. 2000; Maxwell A. Cameron 1998a; Bermeo 2016; Helmke 2017; Marsteintredet and Malamud 2019). This label gained prominence in scholarly discourse following the 1992 actions of Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori, who dissolved Congress, temporarily suspended the constitution, and ruled by decree (Mauceri 1995; Maxwell A. Cameron 1998b). However, as Marsteintredet and Malamud (2019) astutely observes, the term self-coup can be misleading, as it implies that the leader is acting against themselves, when in fact such actions are typically directed at other branches of government or state institutions.

A second set of terms seeks to describe these events using modifiers or adjectives, such as 'presidential coup', 'executive coup', 'constitutional coup', 'electoral coup', 'judicial coup',

'slow-motion coup', 'soft coup', and 'parliamentary coup' (Marsteintredet and Malamud 2019). While these expressions may be useful in capturing specific mechanisms or contexts, their proliferation often leads to greater conceptual confusion. Many focus on how the power grab is executed, but fail to consistently identify who the perpetrator is. Moreover, such mechanisms—judicial rulings, legislative actions, or administrative decrees—may be employed either by or against executive leaders, further complicating definitional clarity.

A third group of terms includes expressions such as 'incumbent takeover', 'executive takeover', and 'overstay'. For instance, incumbent takeover refers to "an event perpetuated by a ruling executive that significantly reduces the formal and/or informal constraints on his/her power" (Baturo and Tolstrup 2022, 374), building on earlier research by Svolik (2014). Similarly, overstay is defined as "staying longer than the maximum term as it stood when the candidate originally came into office" (Ginsburg, Melton, and Elkins 2011, 1844). These terms are useful in identifying the actor (the incumbent) and the behaviour (extending or consolidating power). However, they fall short in conveying the illegality or unconstitutionality of such actions. Unlike coup, which inherently implies an unlawful seizure of power, terms such as takeover or overstay may understate the severity of the act.

Given that many of these terms prioritise procedural mechanisms over normative content, or fail to distinguish between legal and extra-legal conduct, this study adopts 'autocoup' as the most appropriate and analytically coherent term. It offers several key advantages:

Clarity and precision: Autocoup is a specific and unambiguous term that encapsulates the essential character of the event—namely, the unlawful extension of an incumbent leader's tenure—while clearly distinguishing it from traditional coups and other forms of executive overreach.

Normative and analytical weight: The suffix -coup conveys the gravity of the event, highlighting its unconstitutional and destabilising nature, and affirming its relevance to both academic inquiry and policy discourse on par with, or exceeding, that of classic coups.

Identification of the perpetrator: The prefix auto- unambiguously identifies the incum-

bent leader as the instigator, thereby differentiating autocoups from traditional coups, which are typically carried out by actors external to the executive.

Terminological symmetry: Sharing a common root with coup allows for conceptual alignment and comparative analysis. This symmetry facilitates the study of coups and autocoups as distinct but related forms of irregular power transitions, thereby enhancing analytical coherence and explanatory scope.

In sum, autocoup represents the most effective and analytically robust term for describing this phenomenon. It captures both the actor and the act, while signalling its irregularity, seriousness, and theoretical proximity to classic coups, thereby supporting the unified framework proposed in this thesis.

Definition

While the use of precise terminology is undoubtedly important, another significant issue in previous definitions of autocoups concerns the identification of their primary characteristic: is the central feature power expansion, tenure extension, or a combination of both? This question arises from the notable ambiguity in existing definitions of autocoups and related terms.

Within the field of political science, the concepts of power expansion and tenure extension often overlap or are ambiguously applied, contributing to potential confusion. To facilitate greater conceptual clarity, it is necessary to distinguish more rigorously between these two frameworks. Power expansion refers to the process by which an incumbent leader accrues authority beyond their original constitutional mandate—typically through the centralisation of power, the weakening of checks and balances, or encroachment upon other state institutions such as the legislature or judiciary. Tenure extension, by contrast, refers to efforts by a leader to remain in power beyond the term originally prescribed, often through constitutional amendments, the cancellation or manipulation of elections, or other mechanisms used to circumvent term limits.

Existing definitions of autocoups frequently conflate these two dynamics or place disproportionate emphasis on power expansion. For instance, Maxwell A. Cameron (1998a) defines a self-coup as "a temporary suspension of the constitution and dissolution of congress by the executive, who rules by decree until new legislative elections and a referendum can be held to ratify a political system with broader executive power" (p. 220). Yet the concept of "broader executive power" is inherently vague and contestable. Similarly, the term incumbent takeover, defined as "an event perpetuated by a ruling executive that significantly reduces the formal and/or informal constraints on his/her power" (Baturo and Tolstrup 2022, 374), draws on earlier work by Svolik (2014) and centres on power expansion. However, the dataset based on this definition includes cases involving both power expansion and tenure extension. In contrast, the term overstay is clearly defined as "staying longer than the maximum term as it stood when the candidate originally came into office" (Ginsburg, Melton, and Elkins 2011, 1844), thereby focusing specifically on tenure extension.

This thesis contends that tenure extension should be the primary and defining characteristic of an autocoup, for several reasons.

First, this focus aligns autocoups conceptually with traditional coups. A classic coup is typically defined by the forcible and premature removal of a sitting executive; it does not necessarily involve restrictions on the leader's powers, but rather a disruption of tenure. By the same logic, an autocoup should be defined by the prolongation of tenure, not merely by the expansion of executive power. An incumbent may experience a reduction in authority without being removed from office—such a case would not be coded as a coup. Similarly, a leader who consolidates power without exceeding term limits would fall under the category of executive aggrandisement, but not an autocoup.

Second, in practice, power expansion often serves as a strategic means to facilitate tenure extension. The widely cited case of President Alberto Fujimori in Peru illustrates this dynamic. Although his 1992 movement involved the suspension of the constitution and the dissolution of Congress, the ultimate objective was to secure continued rule. The 1993 Constitution allowed

him to seek a second term, which he won in 1995. Subsequently, a law of "authentic interpretation" passed by his allies in Congress enabled him to run again in 2000—a move shrouded in controversy. Although he secured re-election, Fujimori's regime ultimately collapsed in 2000 amidst corruption and human rights scandals, prompting his flight to Japan (Ezrow 2019). In this light, it is illogical for incumbents to expand their powers unless they intend to remain in office; doing so only enhances the authority of their successors, whose interests may diverge from their own.

Third, measuring power expansion poses greater methodological challenges than identifying tenure extension. For example, Maxwell A. Cameron (1998a) defines a self-coup as involving both constitutional suspension and congressional dissolution. Yet it is unclear whether either act alone constitutes an autocoup, or whether both are required, or even whether they should be coded as separate events. Although the difficulty of measurement should not preclude consideration of power expansion, a clear starting point is needed. This thesis therefore prioritises tenure extension as the definitional core of autocoups, leaving the broader discussion of power expansion (and its inverse, power contraction) for future research.

Based on these considerations, this study defines an **autocoup** as:

> *The extension of an incumbent leader's tenure in office beyond the originally mandated limit, achieved through either legal manipulation or overtly illegal means.*

This definition centres on tenure extension as the core feature, while acknowledging the possible coexistence of power expansion.

First, the term refers to the actual national leader, regardless of formal office. For instance, although Vladimir Putin formally stepped down as President of Russia in 2008 and assumed the premiership, real political power remained with him. During this period, the presidency—held by Dmitry Medvedev—functioned largely as a symbolic office under Putin's continued control (Chaisty 2019). To avoid arbitrariness, this study adopts the Archigos dataset (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009) to determine whether an incumbent has effectively remained in

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power.

Second, while tenure extension is the definitional cornerstone, this approach does not exclude concurrent power expansion. Both may occur simultaneously, but the act of overextending one's time in office is the decisive criterion. In the Fujimori case, for example, the 1992 actions were not coded as an autocoup until the 1993 constitutional amendment that enabled his re-election.

Third, autocoups may be carried out through both legal and illegal means. For instance, Chadian President François Tombalbaye postponed general elections until 1969 following his rise to power in 1960. Likewise, Angolan President José Eduardo dos Santos suspended elections throughout his nearly four-decade rule (Baturo and Elgie, n.d.). These represent clear violations of constitutional norms. However, other cases—such as Putin's 2008 manoeuvre— may not be overtly illegal, yet undermine the constitutional spirit intended to limit consecutive terms. Hence, this definition emphasises the functional illegitimacy of such actions, regardless of formal legality, particularly when the incumbent is the clear and direct beneficiary.

Finally, an incumbent leader who seeks re-election in accordance with the existing constitution is clearly not engaging in an autocoup. However, if they subsequently refuse to accept an electoral defeat and remain in power beyond their legitimate mandate, such an action would qualify as an autocoup.

By clarifying these definitional boundaries, this chapter sets the conceptual foundation for the autocoup dataset introduced in the next section.

2.3   Introduction to the autocoup dataset

Defining the scope

Classifying political events as autocoups often requires addressing borderline cases. To ensure consistency and minimise ambiguity, this study employs a coding strategy grounded in the def-

inition advanced in the previous section. Specifically, only those instances in which incumbent leaders extend their originally mandated term in office are coded as autocoups. Cases involving solely power expansion without any corresponding tenure extension are excluded from the dataset.

The temporal scope of the dataset spans from 1945 to the end of 2023, reflecting the most recent data available at the time of compilation. The geographical coverage is global, encompassing leaders from all countries and regions worldwide.

Classifying autocoups

In categorising autocoups, this study primarily focuses on the methods employed by incumbents, with the outcomes considered as a secondary classificatory dimension. Other aspects are coded when relevant information is available.

Evasion of term limits

One of the most common tactics employed in autocoups is the evasion of term limits. Incumbents often use ostensibly legal mechanisms to extend their hold on power, primarily through the manipulation of constitutional provisions. Such manoeuvres may involve pressuring legislatures or judicial bodies to reinterpret term limits, amending the constitution to extend terms, or even replacing the constitution entirely. In some cases, referendums are used to give these actions a veneer of legitimacy. These extensions may range from a single additional term to indefinite rule. Key methods include:

Changing term length: Incumbents may increase the duration of a single term (e.g., from four to six years) without altering the number of permitted terms. Examples include President David Dacko (Central African Republic, 1962), President Grégoire Kayibanda (Rwanda, 1973), and President Augusto Pinochet (Chile, 1988).

Enabling re-election: This involves amending legal or constitutional frameworks to allow

previously barred re-election. For instance, President Carlos Menem of Argentina in 1993 modified the constitution to permit himself to run again, thereby extending his tenure.

Removing term limits altogether: An example is President Paul Biya of Cameroon, who in 2008 successfully abolished presidential term limits, allowing himself to run for re-election indefinitely.

Declaring leader for life: Unlike the removal of term limits, this declaration often retains the appearance of electoral competition, albeit through rigged or uncontested elections. For example, Indonesia's President Sukarno attempted to declare himself president for life in 1963, though ultimately unsuccessfully.

These strategies are often used in combination. For instance, Haitian President François Duvalier first amended the constitution in 1961 to permit immediate re-election and later declared himself president for life in 1964.

Election manipulation or rigging

The second most frequently employed tactic in autocoups involves the manipulation of electoral processes to ensure incumbents remain in office.

Delaying or cancelling elections: Postponing scheduled elections without legitimate justification is a frequent strategy. President François Tombal baye of Chad, for example, delayed general elections until 1969 after assuming power in 1960. Similarly, Angolan President José Eduardo dos Santos suspended elections throughout his rule from 1979 to 2017.

Rejecting unfavourable election outcomes: Incumbents may refuse to accept electoral defeat and seek to remain in power through unconstitutional means. A high-profile case is President Donald Trump of the United States, who refused to accept the 2020 election results and attempted to overturn them.

Electoral rigging: Securing re-election through implausibly high vote shares is a key indicator of electoral manipulation. This study codes elections in which incumbents receive over 90% of the vote as indicative of an autocoup. President Teodoro Obiang of Equatorial Guinea

has routinely secured over 95% of the vote in multiparty elections since 1996.

Exclusion of opposition: Preventing opposition parties or candidates from participating in elections—thereby turning them into uncontested contests—constitutes a clear sign of an autocoup.

Figurehead Installation

Some incumbents circumvent term limits by installing a trusted proxy or figurehead while retaining de facto control over state affairs. This strategy enables them to relinquish formal office while continuing to govern from behind the scenes.

A prominent example is the 2008 Russian presidential transition. Confronted with constitutional term limits, President Vladimir Putin endorsed Dmitry Medvedev as his successor, who was subsequently elected. Medvedev then appointed Putin as Prime Minister. Despite this formal role reversal, most analysts concur that Putin maintained substantial influence, effectively rendering Medvedev a figurehead.

It is important to note that the identification of such cases must be anchored in objective criteria to avoid arbitrary classification. Accordingly, this thesis relies on the Archigos dataset to determine leadership status. If a former officeholder is not recorded as the country's leader in Archigos—despite retaining informal power—they are not coded as engaging in a figurehead-style autocoup within this dataset.

Reassignment of supreme authority

This strategy involves restructuring the legal or constitutional system to create a new, more powerful role, which the incumbent then assumes after formally leaving office.

In 2017, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan spearheaded a constitutional referendum that transformed the country from a parliamentary to a presidential system. The presidency, under the new system, was endowed with significantly expanded executive powers.

Erdoğan then ran for, and won, the newly empowered presidency, thus maintaining control under a different institutional guise.

One-time extension arrangements

In certain cases, special arrangements are enacted to extend an incumbent's tenure without altering the broader institutional framework. These extensions are explicitly tailored to the current officeholder, with constitutional rules on term limits or tenure intended to resume their normal application for future leaders. For instance, in 2004, Lebanon extended President Émile Lahoud's term by three years through a one-time legal provision that applied solely to his incumbency.

Data coding

The autocoup dataset is constructed upon a foundation of established datasets and scholarly work, ensuring both reliability and comprehensiveness. The primary sources used for coding are outlined in Table 2.1.

The Archigos dataset (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009) and the Political Leaders' Affiliation Database (PLAD) (Bomprezzi et al. 2024) provide detailed records of national leaders from 1875 to 2023. Although this study focuses on events from 1945 onwards, these datasets are instrumental in identifying de facto leaders, distinguishing them from nominal heads of state.

The Incumbent Takeover dataset (Baturo and Tolstrup 2022), which integrates data from 11 separate sources, offers a broad collection of cases where executives significantly reduced constraints on their authority. As this dataset includes both power expansion and tenure extension cases, cross-referencing with Archigos and PLAD was necessary to determine whether each case met the criteria for an autocoup.

Table 2.1: Main Data Sources for Coding the Autocoup Dataset

Dataset	Authors	Coverage	Obervations
Archigos	Goemans et al (2009)	1875-2015	3409
PLAD	Bomprezzi et al. (2024)	1989-2023	1334
Incumbent Takeover	Baturo and Tolstrup (2022)	1913-2019	279

In total, 109 events were coded as autocoups. Of these, 94 overlap with entries in the Incumbent Takeover dataset. The remaining 15 cases were newly identified and coded by the author through verification with supplementary sources such as Archigos, PLAD, and contemporary news reports.

Although the majority of observations originate from the Incumbent Takeover dataset, this study is not a replication of that work. Over two-thirds of entries in Incumbent Takeover were excluded, as they involved power expansions unaccompanied by any attempt to extend tenure—thereby falling outside the definitional scope of autocoups in this thesis. This distinction represents the principal departure from the Incumbent Takeover dataset.

The final dataset includes 14 structured variables in addition to a free-text notes field. The variables are as follows:

- **Country identification:** Country code (ccode) and country name (country) follow the Correlates of War project standard (Stinnett et al. 2002).

- **Leader information:** Name of the de facto leader (leader_name), coded in line with the conventions of the Archigos and PLAD datasets.

- **Timeline variables:** Date the leader assumed power (entry_date), date of departure (exit_date), date of the autocoup-defining event (autocoup_date), and start date of the extended term (extending_date).

- **Power transition methods:** Entry method (entry_method), exit method (exit_method), and dummy variables for regular or irregular entry (entry_regular) and exit (exit_regular).

- **Autocoup characteristics:** Method of power extension (autocoup_method) and outcome of the attempt (autocoup_outcome), categorised as "failed and removed from office", "failed but completed original tenure", or "successful". For successful cases, the length of the additional term is calculated from the difference between exit_date and extending_date.

- **Data source:** The primary dataset used to code each case (source).

- **Additional notes:** Contextual explanations for exceptional or borderline cases (notes).

Several coding challenges and decisions merit further explanation. In cases where tenure extensions occurred incrementally, the autocoup_date reflects a defining event—such as the passage of a constitutional amendment, legislative vote, or successful referendum. Where leaders made multiple attempts at autocoups, details are consolidated in the notes field. Special attention was paid to differentiating between mere power consolidation and clear attempts to prolong tenure, requiring triangulation across multiple sources. Additionally, determining the success or failure of an autocoup, particularly in underreported cases, often necessitated in-depth background research.

Data descriptions

The primary coding process identified 109 cases of autocoups between 1945 and 2023, spanning 73 countries. This comprehensive dataset provides a robust foundation for analysing trends and patterns in autocoup attempts across diverse political and institutional contexts.

A breakdown of the methods employed by incumbents to extend their tenure is presented in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2: Autocoup methods and success rates (1945-2023)

Autocoup Method	Attempted	Succeeded	Success Rate
Enabling re-election	45	33	73.3%
Removing term limits	14	14	100.0%
Delaying elections	9	9	100.0%
Leader for life	9	9	100.0%
Changing term length	7	5	71.4%
Figurehead	5	4	80.0%
One-time arrangement	5	4	80.0%
Refusing election results	4	1	25.0%
Reassigning power role	4	2	50.0%
Cancelling elections	3	3	100.0%
Rigging elections	2	1	50.0%
Total	107	85	79.4%

Source: Autocoup dataset

The most prevalent method is enabling re-election, accounting for 45 cases. This is followed by removing term limits (14 cases), and delaying elections and declaring the leader for life, each with 9 cases. Other methods, such as cancelling elections or rejecting electoral defeat, are less frequently observed.

Autocoups demonstrate a notably high overall success rate of 80%, in stark contrast to the approximate 50% success rate of classical coups. Several factors may account for this disparity. First, incumbents possess direct access to state resources and institutional levers that can be mobilised in their favour. Second, unlike the abrupt nature of traditional coups, autocoups are often gradual and strategic, allowing time to consolidate elite support and cultivate public legitimacy. Third, many autocoup tactics are cloaked in legal or constitutional procedures, reducing overt resistance and complicating opposition efforts. Finally, incumbents typically exercise considerable control over state institutions—including the judiciary, legislature, and security apparatus—which can facilitate the execution and consolidation of such moves.

Nevertheless, success rates vary significantly depending on the method employed. Certain strategies appear to be consistently effective. For example, removing term limits, delaying elec-

tions, declaring oneself leader for life, and cancelling elections all demonstrate a 100% success rate within the dataset. Notably, these methods represent some of the most overt violations of constitutional norms governing leadership succession. This pattern suggests that success is influenced more by the underlying balance of power than by the degree of legal or constitutional violation. In other words, it is not the illegality of the act that determines success, but rather the extent of the incumbent's control over political institutions. Leaders who command overwhelming authority are often willing and able to blatantly defy established processes, precisely because their dominance over the state apparatus shields them from effective resistance.

By contrast, refusing to accept election results exhibits the lowest success rate, with only one out of four attempts proving successful. Although the sample size is small, this pattern may reflect the greater institutional resilience of electoral democracies, stronger civil society mobilisation, heightened international scrutiny, and the inherently high-risk nature of attempting to overturn electoral outcomes. These factors may increase the likelihood of failure for incumbents who pursue this path.

2.4 Case studies

2.4.1 High frequency and success rate of autocoups in post-communist regimes

The dataset reveals a notably high frequency and success rate of autocoup attempts in post-communist countries. These states, formerly governed under communist rule prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, have predominantly transitioned into 'hybrid regimes' (Nurumov and Vashchanka 2019), with only a small number—such as China—retaining their communist identity. Within these contexts, the dataset records 12 autocoup attempts aimed at prolonging incumbency, of which only two failed. An examination of these cases highlights several shared structural and political characteristics.

First, many post-communist regimes inherited authoritarian institutional frameworks. Although most transitioned formally to non-communist governments, they often retained significant authoritarian features from their communist past, particularly in the consolidation of executive power.

Second, elite continuity has been a defining feature of these transitions. Rather than involving a decisive rupture with the previous regime, political transitions in many post-communist countries saw former communist elites maintain their positions of influence, often rebranding themselves within newly formed or nominally democratic institutions.

Third, post-communist regimes have frequently subverted democratic processes. While elections and constitutional term limits were introduced during democratisation efforts, the institutional legacies of communist rule have often facilitated the manipulation of electoral outcomes and the circumvention of term limits (Nurumov and Vashchanka 2019).

Case 1: Lifelong ruler: Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus

Alexander Lukashenko, a former member of the Supreme Soviet of the Byelorussian SSR, rose to national prominence as the head of Belarus's interim anti-corruption committee following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In 1994, he was elected as the first president of Belarus, a position he has retained ever since. The original 1994 constitution imposed a two-term limit on the presidency; however, this restriction was abolished in 2004 via constitutional amendment.

Since his first electoral victory, international observers have consistently deemed Belarusian elections neither free nor fair. Despite widespread domestic opposition and recurring protests, Lukashenko has repeatedly claimed re-election victories, often securing over 80% of the vote. This pattern is indicative of a broader regional trend across Central Asia, where many post-Soviet leaders—previously high-ranking officials within the communist apparatus—transitioned into the presidency and maintained power with limited institutional challenge.

Case 2: Dynastic succession: Nursultan Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan

Nursultan Nazarbayev served as the first president of independent Kazakhstan from 1991 to 2019. Prior to this, he held de facto leadership as First Secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan, placing him at the helm of political power both before and after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Following independence, Nazarbayev was elected president and remained in power through various constitutional and legal manoeuvres, including the implementation of new constitutions that effectively reset term limits.

Significantly, Nazarbayev did not eliminate term limits outright. Instead, a constitutional exemption was introduced exclusively for the "First President", allowing him to bypass term constraints while maintaining the appearance of legal continuity (Nurumov and Vashchanka 2019). In contrast to Lukashenko, who remains in office, Nazarbayev formally stepped down in 2019, transferring the presidency to his designated successor, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. Nevertheless, Nazarbayev retained substantial political influence, particularly in his role as Chairman of the Security Council, a position he held until 2022—underscoring the persistence of informal executive dominance even after formal succession.

2.4.2 Autocoups for immediate re-election: Cases of Latin America

Latin America has a long-standing tradition of constitutional term limits on executive power. Simón Bolívar, regarded as a founding father of several Latin American republics, initially championed this principle, declaring in 1819 that "nothing is as dangerous as allowing the same citizen to remain in power for a long time… That is the origin of usurpation and tyranny" (Ginsburg and Elkins 2019, 38). Although Bolívar later altered his position—asserting in his 1826 speech to the Constitutional Assembly that "a president for life with the right to choose the successor is the most sublime inspiration for the republican order"—the notion of term limits became embedded in the region's political culture. Indeed, approximately 81% of Latin American constitutions between independence and 1985 included some form of presidential

term limitation (Marsteintredet 2019).

An analysis of autocoup cases in the region reveals two notable patterns concerning re-election dynamics.

Frequent success in breaking non-re-election rules

Unlike in many presidential systems where two consecutive terms are the norm, Latin American constitutions historically favoured more restrictive models. According to Marsteintredet (2019), 64.9% of constitutions in the region between independence and 1985 prohibited immediate re-election, while 5.9% forbade re-election altogether.

Nonetheless, adherence to these rules has varied. Countries such as Mexico, which introduced a strict non-re-election clause in 1911 at the outset of the Mexican Revolution, have upheld this principle consistently (Klesner 2019). Similarly, Panama and Uruguay have never amended their re-election provisions, while Costa Rica has allowed immediate re-election only briefly (1897–1913) since banning it in 1859 (Marsteintredet 2019). In contrast, other states have frequently amended or circumvented constitutional term limits.

The pursuit of re-election or immediate re-election has been a key catalyst for autocoup attempts aimed at extending executive power. This study identifies 32 autocoup cases in Latin America, of which 17 (over 50%) involved attempts to enable re-election or immediate re-election. Among these, 10 were successful—a success rate of approximately 59%.

Importantly, not all such leaders sought indefinite rule. Many stepped down after securing and completing a second term. Notable examples include: Fernando Henrique Cardoso (Brazil, 1995–2003); Danilo Medina (Dominican Republic, 2012–2020); Juan Orlando Hernández (Honduras, 2014–2022) (Ginsburg and Elkins 2019; Marsteintredet 2019; Landau, Roznai, and Dixon 2019; Baturo 2019; Neto and Acácio 2019).

Resistance to further extensions

The relative restraint shown by many leaders should not be interpreted as an absence of ambition for further tenure. Rather, it suggests that additional extension attempts often failed, and that incumbents accepted these outcomes without resorting to overt manipulation or repression.

While autocoups enabling a single additional term tend to be relatively successful, attempts to prolong tenure beyond two terms face greater resistance and are more prone to failure.

Two contrasting cases illustrate these divergent trajectories:

Unsuccessful extension: Carlos Menem (Argentina): President Menem successfully secured a second term through a 1994 constitutional amendment that allowed one re-election. He was re-elected in 1995. However, his subsequent attempt to reset his term count—arguing that his first term (1988–1995) fell under a previous constitutional framework—was unanimously rejected by the Supreme Court in 1999 (Llanos 2019). A similar case occurred with President Álvaro Uribe in Colombia (2002–2010) (Baturo 2019).

Successful extension: Daniel Ortega (Nicaragua): In contrast, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega successfully extended his tenure through a series of judicial and legislative actions. In 2009, the Supreme Court of Justice authorised his re-election in 2011. Subsequently, in 2014, the National Assembly passed constitutional amendments abolishing presidential term limits, enabling Ortega to seek unlimited five-year terms. He has remained in power since 2007 (Close 2019).

2.4.3   As common as classical coups: Autocoups in African countries

Classical coups have historically been widespread across the African continent, accounting for approximately 45% of all coups globally—219 out of 491 recorded incidents since 1950—affecting 45 out of 54 African states (Powell and Thyne 2011). Although autocoups occur less frequently than traditional coups, they nonetheless represent a significant political phenomenon in Africa. Of the 110 documented autocoup cases worldwide, 46% (51 cases) have taken place

in Africa, involving 36 countries. Remarkably, the success rate of autocoups in Africa exceeds 84% (43 out of 51), surpassing not only the regional success rate of classical coups (approximately 50%) but also the global average success rate of autocoups (79%).

Identifying a clear and consistent pattern for autocoups in Africa proves difficult—mirroring the analytical complexity associated with classical coups. Several explanatory factors have been proposed in the literature:

Natural resource wealth: Countries rich in oil, diamonds, or other strategic commodities often see incumbents more inclined to pursue and succeed in term extensions (Posner and Young, n.d.; Cheeseman 2015; Cheeseman and Klaas 2019).

Democratic quality: The degree of democratic consolidation strongly influences respect for constitutional term limits (Reyntjens 2016).

International influence: External actors, including donors and international organisations, may exert pressure to deter leaders from violating term limits (S. Brown 2001; Tangri and Mwenda 2010).

Opposition strength and party cohesion: The ability of the opposition to organise effectively, and the president's success in maintaining unity within the ruling party, are also decisive factors (Cheeseman 2019).

Drawing on the Africa Executive Term Limits (AETL) dataset, Cassani (2020) identifies human rights abuses and the desire to evade accountability as key drivers behind attempts to overstay in power. The more authoritarian the leadership style, the more likely the incumbent is to challenge constitutional limits. Additionally, a leader's ability to command loyalty from the military, often through strategic public investment, significantly increases the likelihood of successful tenure extension.

Although both coups and autocoups remain prevalent, a notable shift has occurred since the end of the Cold War in 1991. The frequency of traditional coups has declined, while autocoups have become increasingly common. This trend is partly attributable to the introduction of multiparty electoral systems in the 1990s, which were frequently accompanied by the insti-

tutionalisation of presidential term limits (Cassani 2020; Cheeseman 2019).

Prior to 1991, personalist or military rule predominated across much of the continent, and term limits were rarely codified. In the post-Cold War period, the proliferation of democratic frameworks led to an increase in term-limit provisions—and, correspondingly, a rise in attempts to circumvent them. It is important to emphasise, however, that this uptick in term-limit challenges does not necessarily indicate a decline in compliance. On the contrary, overall turnover in executive leadership has increased compared to previous decades, suggesting that while term-limit violations attract attention, adherence to constitutional constraints has also become more common.

2.5   Summary

This chapter has presented a comprehensive analysis of autocoups, focusing on political events in which incumbent leaders extend their tenure beyond constitutional limits. By refining existing definitions and distinguishing autocoups from related concepts—such as self-coups, auto-golpes, and executive takeovers—the study introduces a novel dataset cataloguing 109 autocoup cases from 1945 to 2023, of which 87 were successful.

The revised conceptual framework, together with the newly compiled dataset, enables a broader and more systematic analysis of irregular leadership transitions. Whereas traditional research has largely concentrated on the premature termination of leadership through coups, this study expands the analytical lens to include irregular tenure extensions. This approach offers a more nuanced understanding of how incumbent leaders may subvert constitutional norms and democratic processes to entrench their authority.

Nonetheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the proposed definition of an autocoup requires further scholarly engagement and debate before it can be widely adopted. Despite efforts to ensure objectivity, certain coding decisions—particularly in ambiguous or borderline cases—may unavoidably involve subjective judgement. Second, while this thesis

focuses on tenure extensions, events involving the expansion of executive power—without a formal extension of tenure—also merit deeper conceptual and empirical exploration.

Despite these constraints, the research makes a substantive contribution to the literature on political stability, leadership dynamics, and democratic resilience. The dataset offers a valuable empirical foundation for future research into the mechanisms and motivations behind autocoups.

Several promising avenues for further inquiry emerge. Future studies could leverage the dataset to explore long-term institutional impacts, including the role of autocoups in democratic backsliding, authoritarian consolidation, and the personalisation of power. In addition, comparative analyses of autocoups and classical coups may shed light on the evolving strategies of power consolidation in different regime types and political contexts.

Chapter 3

Power Dynamics and Autocoup Attempts

Abstract

This chapter investigates the determinants of autocoup attempts, seeking to enhance understanding of the political dynamics underpinning tenure extensions by incumbent leaders. Addressing a gap in the literature, the study employs a quantitative approach, utilising a bias-reduced logit model to explore the relationship between regime type and the likelihood of autocoup occurrence. Particular attention is paid to how regime type reflects the structural balance of power between incumbents and potential institutional constraints or elite challengers. The findings indicate that regime type is a significant predictor of autocoup attempts. Specifically, personalist autocracies and presidential democracies are shown to be substantially more likely to experience autocoups compared to dominant party regimes. This increased propensity is discussed in relation to the varying degrees of institutional constraints and power configurations characteristic of different regime types, offering insights into the structural conditions that facilitate or constrain such irregular power consolidations.

Keywords: *Autocoups, Coup, Regime types, Tenure Extension, Authoritarianism*

3.1 Introduction

As discussed in Chapter 2, the study of autocoups has been hindered by conceptual ambiguity and a lack of systematic data, resulting in limited empirical analysis of this phenomenon. To address this gap, the present chapter seeks to make a substantive contribution by offering a quantitative analysis of the determinants of autocoup attempts. Following the precedent set by empirical research on classic coups, which has primarily focused on the factors precipitating coup attempts (Gassebner, Gutmann, and Voigt 2016), this chapter similarly investigates why some incumbent leaders choose to extend their tenure through autocoups, while others do not.

The rationale for investigating the determinants of autocoups is threefold. First, autocoups represent one of the most frequent forms of irregular leadership transition, with over 100 documented cases since 1945 (as detailed in Chapter 2). Their prevalence has increased notably since 2000, coinciding with the apparent global decline in classic coups (Bermeo 2016; Thyne and Powell 2019). Second, autocoups play a critical role in shaping political stability and democratic trajectories, frequently resulting in long-term institutional erosion. Third, understanding the factors that drive autocoup attempts constitutes a foundational step for further enquiry into their consequences. Without identifying the conditions under which autocoups occur, it is difficult to assess how to prevent them or mitigate their negative effects.

While autocoups differ fundamentally from classic coups—primarily in terms of the actor initiating the event (the incumbent, rather than a power challenger)—the two forms of power disruption share important features. Consequently, methods commonly applied to the study of traditional coups can be usefully adapted for the analysis of autocoups. Nevertheless, despite an extensive literature on coup dynamics (Gassebner, Gutmann, and Voigt 2016), many studies treat regime type as a mere background condition or control variable, rather than as a central determinant of power disruptions.

This chapter advances the argument that the risk of autocoup attempts is significantly shaped by the structural balance of power embedded within a regime's foundational type. It contends

that the likelihood of an autocoup is determined by the perceived power equilibrium between the incumbent leader and potential institutional or elite challengers. This power configuration is relatively stable over time, as it is both shaped by and constitutive of the regime type itself (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014). Accordingly, this study employs regime type as a proxy for underlying power dynamics, enabling a more systematic investigation of the structural conditions that facilitate or constrain autocoup attempts.

To empirically test this proposition, the chapter employs a probit regression model to examine the strategic calculus of incumbent leaders. It argues that the balance of power, as inferred from regime typology, is a key determinant of whether an incumbent will initiate an autocoup.

Given the inherent difficulty in directly measuring the internal balance of power within regimes, regime type is used as an operational proxy. The premise underpinning this approach is that regime type fundamentally conditions the distribution of authority, the strength of institutional constraints, and the capacity of incumbents to subvert constitutional norms. By analysing variation across regime types, this study provides deeper insight into the structural factors that influence both the occurrence and outcome of autocoup attempts.

In light of the limited quantitative research on autocoups in the existing literature, this thesis aims to make a pioneering contribution to their empirical study by offering a theoretically grounded and methodologically robust analysis of their determinants.

The remainder of this chapter is organised as follows. Section 2 examines the dynamics and patterns of autocoup attempts and their outcomes. Section 3 outlines the research design, methodology, and variables used in the analysis, offering a clear account of the empirical strategy. Section 4 presents and interprets the findings, identifying key trends and implications. Section 5 concludes the chapter by summarising the main insights and considering their relevance for understanding and mitigating the risks of autocoups.

3.2 Dynamics of autocoup attempts

Much like traditional coup attempts, autocoups are driven by two fundamental factors: the disposition of incumbent leaders—namely, their motivations and willingness to act—and their capability, referring to the resources and opportunities available to them. However, autocoups exhibit two notable features that distinguish them from classical coups. First, whereas coups predominantly occur in autocracies (C. L. Thyne and Powell 2014), approximately one-third of recorded autocoups have taken place in democracies, as documented in Chapter 2. Second, while the success rate of traditional coups hovers around 50%, more than 80% of autocoup attempts have succeeded, according to the autocoup dataset introduced in Chapter 2. These distinctions suggest that the disposition and capability dynamics underpinning autocoups differ substantially from those governing traditional coups. This section examines the complex dynamics of autocoup attempts, focusing particularly on how the motivations of incumbents, the factors influencing success, and the institutional structures of regime types shape a state's vulnerability to such actions.

Motivations for autocoups

Incumbent leaders seeking to extend their tenure may be motivated by a variety of considerations, which can broadly be categorised into three principal domains: personal ambition, purported national interest, and self-preservation.

First, the pursuit of personal power serves as a powerful incentive for many leaders. The ability to govern without institutional constraints grants them control over national policy, access to significant state resources, influence over the judiciary and legislature, and the prestige associated with continued office. For some, the desire to secure a lasting political legacy—to be remembered as a transformative figure in national history—further reinforces the appeal of prolonged rule.

Second, incumbents often justify tenure extensions as being in the national interest. A com-

mon argument posits that a single term is insufficient to complete long-term reform or development agendas. In this framing, remaining in office is presented as necessary for the successful realisation of ongoing projects, thereby positioning the autocoup as a sacrifice for the greater good rather than a personal power grab.

Third, autocoups can function as a mechanism for self-preservation. Leaders who face potential prosecution for corruption, human rights abuses, or other crimes may view tenure extension as a means of maintaining immunity. Moreover, those who have accumulated significant political enemies during their time in power may fear retaliation upon stepping down. In such cases, extending one's rule is not only about ambition but also about survival—shielding oneself from legal or political retribution.

Power dynamics and autocoups

While motivations may spark an incumbent's decision to initiate an autocoup, it is often the capability to execute and sustain such an action that proves more decisive. The relatively high frequency and strikingly high success rate of autocoups—over 80%, compared to around 50% for traditional coups—suggest that incumbents enjoy structural advantages when seeking to extend their tenure. These advantages are not confined to autocracies but are also observable in democracies, highlighting that the resources and institutional leverage available to incumbents vary significantly across regimes.

This observation necessitates a closer examination of state power structures—particularly the distribution of control over the armed forces. Military allegiance is a critical determinant of autocoup success. If the armed forces remain loyal to the incumbent, opposition—whether from civil society, the judiciary, or the legislature—can be neutralised or marginalised. Conversely, open defiance by military leaders or a refusal to intervene on behalf of the executive can render an autocoup untenable.

However, it would be reductive to assume that nominal authority as commander-in-chief

translates into uncontested control. Just as it is simplistic to attribute the occurrence of traditional coups solely to military power (Singh 2016), it is equally misleading to presume that incumbents uniformly wield the loyalty of the armed forces. Formal titles belie the often complex and fragile relationships that underpin military loyalty.

In autocratic contexts, the military may not adhere to constitutional norms, but nor is it inherently loyal to the head of state. Executives rely on military officers to implement commands, yet those officers may possess their own ambitions or rival loyalties. For example, in 1971, Ugandan President Milton Obote attempted to dismiss General Idi Amin. In response, Amin capitalised on his influence within the armed forces to stage a successful coup, ousting Obote (Sudduth 2017).

In contrast, consolidated democracies typically institutionalise military allegiance to the constitution rather than to individual officeholders. In the United States, following the 2020 presidential election, General Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, publicly reaffirmed the military's commitment to constitutional principles:

> "We are unique among militaries. We do not take an oath to a king or a queen, a
> tyrant or a dictator. We do not take an oath to an individual. We take an oath to the
> Constitution."
>
> — (US Army Museum, 12 November 2020[1])

In hybrid or fragile democracies, attempts to extend executive tenure can carry higher risks. For example, in Niger (2009), President Mamadou Tandja's efforts to amend the constitution and secure a third term provoked a military coup in 2010 (Miller 2016). Similarly, in Honduras (2009), President Manuel Zelaya was removed from office by the military after attempting to modify the constitution to allow immediate re-election (Muñoz-Portillo and Treminio 2019).

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[1]CNN. *Top US General Stands Firm Amid Pentagon Turmoil*. 12 November 2020. Available at: https://edition.cnn.com/2020/11/12/politics/mark-milley-pentagon-turmoil/index.html [Accessed 24 April 2025].

Regime types and autocoups

Given these complexities, a more effective analytical strategy involves assessing the broader balance of power within political systems. Direct observation of this balance is inherently difficult, so this study employs regime type as a proxy—a method consistent with established approaches in comparative politics. Regime types reflect the institutional architecture of power distribution, especially regarding authority over military command, political appointments, and policy-making.

Drawing on the classification by Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2014), autocratic regimes can be divided as follows:

Military regimes are governed by a junta, typically composed of senior military officers who collectively determine leadership and policy. Examples include Brazil (1964–1985), Argentina (1976–1983), and El Salvador (1948–1984) (Geddes 1999).

Personalist regimes are centred around a dominant individual who exercises unchecked authority over military, policy, and succession processes. Notable cases include Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic (1930–1961), Idi Amin in Uganda (1971–1979), and Jean-Bédel Bokassa in the Central African Republic (1966–1979) (Geddes 1999).

Dominant-party regimes entrust authority to a structured political party, with the leader operating within, or as the head of, that organisation. Prominent examples include the PRI in Mexico, CCM in Tanzania, and Leninist parties in Eastern Europe (Geddes 1999).

Among these, personalist regimes are particularly conducive to autocoups. The concentration of power reduces institutional resistance, and loyalty from the armed forces is often cultivated through personal patronage. Military regimes, though rooted in armed power, frequently experience internal instability, making them more vulnerable to traditional coups than to autocoups. Dominant-party regimes are more ambiguous: while the leader may be constrained by party structures, exceptionally strong party leaders may nonetheless initiate autocoups—as evidenced by Xi Jinping (2018), operating under dominant-party regimes.

Monarchies, though classified as autocracies, typically render autocoups irrelevant, as monarchs usually serve for life by design.

An important clarification arises at this point: why would leaders in personalist regimes feel compelled to extend their tenure, given the extensive authority they already wield? The answer lies in the distinction between the scope of power and its duration. While personalist rulers often exercise substantial control over state institutions, many originally assume office through constitutional or legal means and must incrementally consolidate power. In this context, autocoups serve as formal mechanisms to institutionalise their dominance, converting de facto authority into de jure permanence. This dynamic is exemplified by the multiple tenure extensions pursued by Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenko.

In post-Soviet Russia, President Boris Yeltsin oversaw the transformation of a parliamentary system into a personalist regime. However, Yeltsin himself did not overstay his term; instead, he selected Vladimir Putin as his successor. Upon assuming office in 2000, Putin progressively extended his rule and has remained in power since, utilising constitutional amendments and legal manoeuvres to circumvent term limits.

Similarly, in Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko was elected president in 1994 under a party-based regime. Within a year, he dismantled the existing political structure and established a personalist system. Since then, Lukashenko has remained in power through successive extensions of his tenure, further entrenching his authority over time.

In democracies, autocoups exclusively occur in presidential systems. This reflects the institutional leverage enjoyed by presidents, who are directly elected, often command the armed forces, and may override or bypass legislative decisions. Prime ministers in parliamentary systems, by contrast, are more constrained. They are typically beholden to legislative confidence and may be dismissed via no-confidence votes. Military command is often institutionally separated from their authority. Consequently, prime ministers face more frequent leadership turnover and fewer opportunities to extend their terms. For example, in the UK, three prime ministers served in 2022; in Japan, there have been 36 prime ministers since 1945—an aver-

age of one every two years. By contrast, only 14 presidents have served in the United States over the same period, reflecting greater institutional stability. Given these distinctions, presidential systems provide a more conducive environment for autocoups—even in established democracies—due to their centralised executive authority and command over the military.

From this analysis, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3-1: *The likelihood of autocoup attempts varies significantly by regime type, with personalist autocracies and presidential democracies being the most susceptible, relative to other regime types.*

3.3 Research design

Methodology

Given the binary nature of the dependent variable—whether an autocoup is staged or not— this section initially employs a logit regression model to analyse the determinants of autocoup attempts. This approach enables the identification of statistically significant factors influencing the likelihood of such events, as well as the direction and magnitude of their effects.

However, since the dataset comprises over 5,000 observations with only approximately 100 instances of autocoups, the dependent variable qualifies as a rare event. Standard maximum likelihood estimation methods such as probit or logit may underestimate the probability of occurrence in such cases. To address this issue and ensure more reliable inference, the analysis additionally applies Firth's Bias-Reduced Penalised Maximum Likelihood Estimation (Bias-Reduced Logit), as proposed by (**?**).

Data and variables

The principal dataset, covering autocoups and regime types, spans the period from 1945 to 2023. However, due to issues in data matching, there is some truncation, and the actual range of usable

data extends from 1945 to 2018. The dataset encompasses approximately 6,000 observations, of which around 100 are instances of autocoup attempts.

Dependent variable

The analysis utilises the autocoup dataset introduced in Chapter 2. This dataset covers the period from 1945 to 2023 and records information on 107 autocoup attempts. Descriptive statistics for these attempts, along with regime classifications, are presented in Chapter 2.

Autocoup attempt: A binary variable indicating whether an autocoup attempt occurred (coded as 1) or did not occur (coded as 0) in each country-year observation.

Independent variables

As discussed, regime type constitutes the primary explanatory focus of the model. Regimes are categorised according to the typology developed by Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2014) (GWF dataset), distinguishing between military, personalist, and dominant-party regimes, with democracies serving as the reference category.

Control variables are selected based on previous research into coup determinants, predominantly encompassing factors such as economic performance, political violence, and tenure in office. In addition, population size and a Cold War dummy variable are included as further controls.

Economic Level: Measured by GDP per capita, representing the general economic wellbeing of a country. Data are sourced from the V-Dem dataset by Fariss et al. (2022), expressed in constant 2017 international dollars (PPP, per thousand).

Economic Performance: Assessed through the current-trend (CT) ratio, as developed by Krishnarajan (2019). This metric compares a country's current GDP per capita with the average GDP per capita over the preceding five years. A higher CT ratio signifies stronger economic growth. Formally:

$$CT_{i,t} = \frac{GDP/cap_{i,t}}{\frac{1}{5}\sum_{k=1}^{5} GDP/cap_{i,t-k}}$$

Political stability: Captured by a violence index reflecting the incidence of internal and interstate conflict, derived from the "actotal" variable in the Major Episodes of Political Violence dataset (Monty G. Marshall 2005). Scores range from 0 (complete stability) to 18 (maximum instability).

Days in office (log): This variable records the natural logarithm of an incumbent leader's cumulative days in office in each year. Longer tenure is posited to facilitate power consolidation, thereby making autocoup attempts more feasible. Data are drawn from the Archigos dataset (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009) and the Political Leaders' Affiliation Database (PLAD) (Bomprezzi et al. 2024).

Population size: The natural logarithm of national population is included to control for the potential impact of population size on leadership stability. Larger populations may pose greater governance challenges and amplify opposition. Population data are sourced from the V-Dem dataset.

Cold War: Following the approach of prior studies (C. L. Thyne and Powell 2014; Derpanopoulos et al. 2016; Dahl and Gleditsch 2023), a dummy variable, Cold War, is included to capture differences across historical periods. This variable reflects the relative scarcity of autocoup events between the 1960s and 1990, with a notable increase thereafter.

Results and discussions

This analysis utilizes a logistic regression model to examine the factors influencing the likelihood of autocoup attempts. Given the nature of the dependent variable (a binary outcome, autocoup attempt occurring or not) and potentially rare events in certain categories, a bias-reduced logit model is employed alongside the standard logit model. The bias-reduced logit approach is generally considered more appropriate when dealing with datasets where the outcome of inter-

Table 3.1: Determinants of autocoup attempts(1945-2018)

Characteristic	Standard Logit		Bias-reduced Logit	
	log(OR)[1,2]	OR[1,2]	log(OR)[1,2]	OR[1,2]
Constant	-5.3***	0.00***	-5.3***	0.01***
Regime Type				
Dominant Party	—	—	—	—
Personal	1.1***	3.03***	1.1***	2.99***
Presidential Democracy	1.4**	4.18**	1.4**	4.06**
Military	0.50	1.65	0.53	1.70
Parliamentary Democracy	-1.9	0.15	-1.5	0.21
Other	-0.75	0.47	-0.67	0.51
GDP per capita	-0.04*	0.96*	-0.03	0.97
GDP growth trend	1.1	2.87	1.1	2.96
Political stability	0.00	1.00	0.01	1.01
Log of Population	-0.14	0.87	-0.14	0.87
Polity 5 scores	-0.07*	0.93*	-0.07*	0.93*
Log of days in office	0.08	1.08	0.07	1.08
Cold war	-0.52*	0.60*	-0.52*	0.60*

[1]*$p<0.05$; **$p<0.01$; ***$p<0.001$
[2]OR = Odds Ratio

est is infrequent, as it helps to mitigate potential biases in the coefficient estimates that can arise in standard maximum likelihood estimation. Therefore, the following discussion of the results will primarily focus on the estimates obtained from the bias-reduced logit model, presenting the findings in terms of Odds Ratios (ORs) for ease of interpretation. Odds Ratios provide a more intuitive understanding of the relationship between predictors and the likelihood of the outcome compared to log odds.

The results from the bias-reduced logit model are presented in Table 3.1. The primary hypothesis posits that the likelihood of autocoup attempts varies significantly by regime type, with personalist autocracies and presidential democracies being particularly susceptible relative to other regime types. The model uses "Dominant Party" regimes as the reference category.

Examining the regime type variables, I find strong support for aspects of the hypothesis. Relative to dominant party regimes, personalist autocracies have an estimated odds ratio of 2.99, which is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). This indicates that the odds of an autocoup

attempt are approximately 3 times higher in personalist autocracies compared to dominant party regimes, holding all other variables constant. Presidential democracies also show a significantly increased likelihood of autocoup attempts, with an estimated odds ratio of 4.06 ($p < 0.01$) compared to dominant party regimes. This suggests that the odds of an autocoup attempt are roughly 4 times higher in presidential democracies than in dominant party regimes, ceteris paribus.

Comparing these to other regime types included in the model, military regimes have an OR of 1.70, which is not statistically significant. Parliamentary democracies show a decreased, though not statistically significant, odds of autocoup ($OR = 0.21$). "Other" regime types also have a non-significant decreased odds ($OR = 0.51$).

These findings strongly support the assertion that both personalist autocracies and presidential democracies face a substantially higher risk of autocoup attempts compared to dominant party regimes. The odds ratios for personalist autocracies (2.99) and presidential democracies (4.06) are notably larger than those for military, parliamentary democracy, and other regime types, providing evidence that these two regime types are indeed more susceptible. This lends considerable support to hypothesis.

Turning to the control variables in the bias-reduced logit model, several show significant associations with autocoup attempts. A higher GDP per capita is associated with a slightly lower, statistically significant, odds of autocoup ($OR = 0.97, p < 0.05$). The log of Polity 5 scores, a measure of democracy, is also associated with a decreased odds of autocoup ($OR = 0.93$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that more democratic regimes are less likely to experience autocoups. The Cold War variable is associated with a significantly lower odds of autocoup attempts ($OR = 0.60, p < 0.05$), indicating that the period of the Cold War saw a reduced likelihood of such events. Other variables, such as GDP growth trend, political stability, log of population, and log of days in office, do not show statistically significant relationships with the likelihood of autocoup attempts in this model.

In summary, the bias-reduced logit model reveals that regime type is a crucial determinant

of autocoup attempts. Consistent with the hypothesis, personalist autocracies and presidential democracies exhibit a significantly higher likelihood of experiencing autocoup attempts compared to dominant party regimes, and appear more vulnerable than other regime types examined. This highlights the particular fragility within these political systems concerning attempts by incumbents to extend their tenures through extra-constitutional means. The analysis also confirms the importance of economic development (GDP per capita), level of democracy (Polity 5 scores), and the historical context of the Cold War in influencing the probability of autocoup attempts.

3.4   Summary

This chapter presents a quantitative investigation into the determinants of autocoup attempts, addressing a recognised gap in the existing literature often hindered by conceptual ambiguity and limited systematic data. The study posits that the risk of autocoup attempts is significantly shaped by the underlying structural balance of power within a regime, operationalised here through regime type. Employing both a standard logit model and a bias-reduced logit model, the analysis reveals that personalist autocracies and presidential democracies exhibit a significantly higher likelihood of experiencing autocoup attempts when compared to dominant party regimes. Specifically, the odds of an autocoup are estimated to be approximately three times greater in personalist autocracies and four times greater in presidential democracies, relative to the reference category.

This finding lends support to the hypothesis that these specific regime types are particularly vulnerable to autocoups, suggesting a clear link between their structural characteristics and the propensity of incumbent leaders to extend their tenures extra legally. Beyond regime type, the study also identifies economic development, the level of democracy, and the historical context of the Cold War as influential factors. By examining the strategic calculus of incumbent leaders across different regime types, this research provides valuable empirical insights into the

conditions that either facilitate or constrain autocoup attempts, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of political instability and democratic trajectories.

It is important to acknowledge certain complexities inherent in the analysis of autocoups that warrant further study. Unlike traditional coups, which can theoretically occur at any point and potentially multiple times within a short period, autocoups initiated by incumbents appear to follow different temporal patterns. For instance, an autocoup attempt may be less likely during the initial phase of a leader's term compared to the period preceding the term's scheduled expiry. Furthermore, while a leader successfully extending their tenure may reduce the immediate likelihood of a subsequent attempt, particularly if a life-long term is secured, it is also true that some leaders have successfully extended their rule on multiple occasions (e.g., Presidents Putin and Lukashenko). To render the analysis manageable within the scope of this study, a simplifying assumption was made that an autocoup attempt occurs only once during an incumbent leader's tenure. These temporal dynamics and the possibility of repeat attempts by the same leader represent important avenues for future research to build upon the foundational analysis presented here.

Chapter 4

Power Acquisition and Leadership Survival: A Comparative Analysis of Coup-installed and Autocoup Leaders

Abstract

This chapter examines the relationship between the methods of power acquisition and the tenure of leaders who ascend to power through unconventional means, with a particular focus on coup-installed and autocoup leaders. The central hypothesis posits that the mode of accession has a profound impact on leadership longevity. Utilizing Cox proportional hazards and time-dependent Cox models, this study provides robust empirical evidence of disparate survival times between these two leader types. The findings reveal that, on average, coup-installed leaders are 2.23 times more likely to be ousted from power than autocoup leaders, all else being equal. These results have far-reaching implications for political stability and democratic processes, suggesting that the perceived low costs and high rewards associated with autocoups may incentivize incumbents to prolong their tenure through this means, potentially contributing to democratic erosion. This research makes a notable contribution to the academic literature by

offering nuanced insights into the dynamics of irregular leadership transitions and enhances our understanding of the complex interplay between power acquisition methods and leadership longevity.

4.1 Introduction

The enduring fascination with the longevity of political leaders has sparked extensive research in political science, with scholars seeking to understand why some leaders maintain power for decades while others are ousted in a matter of months or even days. However, a specific subset of leaders—those who ascend to power through coups or extend their tenure through autocoups—has received relatively limited attention. Examining the tenures of these leaders is crucial, as it sheds light on the dynamics of irregular leadership transitions and their implications for political stability and democratic processes.

In contrast to leaders who attain power through conventional means, those who rise through irregular channels, such as coups or autocoups, present more complex and intriguing cases for study. The Archigos dataset highlights the prevalence of irregular power transitions. Between 1945 and 2015, over half of leaders who assumed power irregularly also exited irregularly, a rate significantly higher than that of leaders who accessed office through regular channels.

Coup-installed and autocoup leaders constitute a substantial portion of these irregular cases. The Archigos dataset notes that of 374 leaders who exited irregularly, 246 (65.8%) were ousted through coups. Furthermore, research by Frantz and Stein (2016) demonstrates that coup-related exits account for approximately one-third of all exits in autocracies, surpassing any other transition type. Additionally, the autocoup dataset, introduced in Chapter 3, documents 110 autocoup attempts between 1945 and 2023, of which 87 were successful.

Measuring the tenure of coup-installed and autocoup leaders poses challenges due to the inherent irregularity and uncertainty of their positions. Nevertheless, a comparative analysis reveals that leaders who extend power through autocoups tend to have longer average post-autocoup tenures (approximately 4.6 years) compared to coup-installed leaders (approximately 11.8 years), suggesting a potential tenure gap of over five years.

A preliminary log-rank test in survival analysis, as illustrated in Figure 4.1, demonstrates a statistically significant difference between the tenures of autocoup and coup-installed lead-
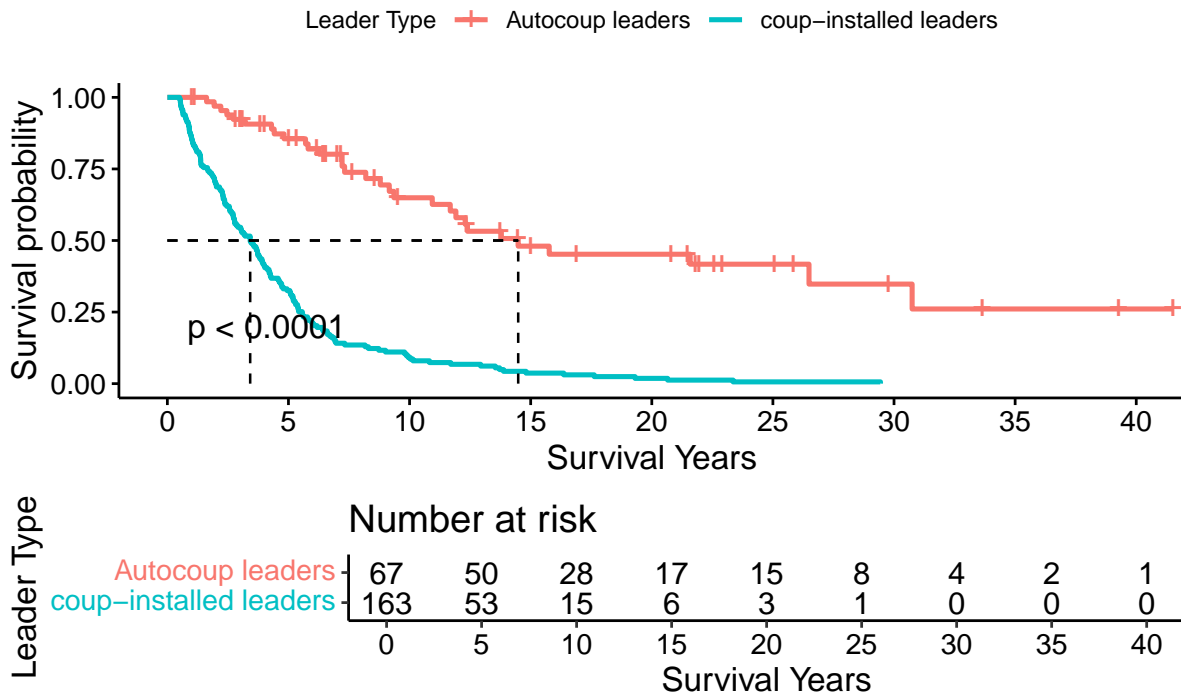
Figure 4.1: Survival curves of autocoup and coup-installed leaders

ers. The survival curve for autocoup leaders consistently exceeds that of coup-installed leaders, indicating longer survival times and a reduced risk of ouster for autocoup leaders.

This study posits that the method of accession significantly influences leadership longevity. Coup-installed leaders likely confront greater challenges to their rule, resulting in shorter average tenures compared to autocoup leaders. The analysis, employing Cox proportional hazards and time-dependent Cox models, supports this hypothesis, demonstrating that autocoup leaders generally experience longer tenures than coup-installed leaders.

This research offers two primary contributions to the field. First, it highlights an understudied factor in leadership survival analysis: the impact of the method of accession to power. The findings suggest that leader survival is influenced not only by ruling strategies but also by the initial method of acquiring power. Second, by employing survival models, this study provides empirical evidence of the significant difference in tenure duration between autocoup and coup-installed leaders. This insight may explain the increasing prevalence of tenure extensions

through autocoups since 2000, as more incumbents observe and potentially emulate successful precedents.

The remainder of this chapter is structured as follows: Section 2 provides a comprehensive literature review on political survival, establishing the context for this research. Section 3 explores the factors influencing the survival of coup and autocoup leaders. Section 4 outlines the methodology and data used, including the application of survival models to analyze the determinants of leadership longevity. Section 5 presents the analysis findings and a detailed discussion of the results. Finally, Section 6 concludes by synthesizing key takeaways and exploring their broader implications for political stability and democratic processes.

4.2   Literature review

The longevity of political leaders, which varies widely across different regimes, countries, and historical periods, has been a longstanding focus of research in political science. This field can be divided into two interconnected areas: regime survival and individual leader survival, which are distinct but related concepts. Regime survival focuses on the endurance of political systems, such as monarchies, political parties, or specific ideological structures, while leader survival concerns the duration of individual leaders' time in office.

Political survival patterns vary widely across different systems. Parliamentary democracies (e.g., Japan, United Kingdom) often experience prolonged periods of party dominance coupled with frequent leadership changes. Similarly, communist regimes (e.g., China) typically demonstrate enduring party rule with more frequent leadership transitions. Presidential systems (e.g., United States) and many military regimes tend to exhibit more frequent changes in both ruling party or junta and leader.

The existing literature on leader survival is extensive and multifaceted. Some studies explore specific mechanisms influencing leadership longevity within particular regimes, such as democracies (Svolik 2014) or autocracies (Davenport, RezaeeDaryakenari, and Wood 2021).

Others aim to develop more generalizable theoretical frameworks explaining leader survival across different political systems (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003). While a universal theory remains an aspirational goal, the complexities of leadership survival across diverse regime types present significant challenges.

Power transition mechanisms vary substantially across different types of regimes, particularly between democracies and autocracies. Autocratic systems often feature closed leadership selection processes, restricted to a narrow pool of individuals. While some autocracies may hold elections, significant barriers to entry for legitimate challengers typically persist. The opacity of selection processes in autocracies makes it difficult to assess genuine levels of public support compared to democracies. Conceptualizing selectorates or winning coalitions, as proposed by Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003), becomes problematic in many autocratic contexts.

Given these complexities, focusing research on specific regimes or leader types may be more fruitful. The study of irregular leaders, such as those who ascend to power through coups or extend their tenures through autocoups, offers a compelling avenue for research due to the inherent complexities and uncertainties surrounding their leadership trajectories.

Two primary perspectives have emerged to explain the dynamics of leader survival. The first emphasizes objective factors and resources, such as personal competence (Yu and Jong-A-Pin 2016), societal stability (Arriola 2009), economic development (Palmer and Whitten 1999; Williams 2011), natural resource endowments (Smith 2004; Quiroz Flores and Smith 2012; Wright, Frantz, and Geddes 2013), and external support (Licht 2009; Wright 2008; C. Thyne et al. 2017). The second focuses on subjective factors and strategies, including political policies, responses to opposition, and tactics for consolidating power (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Morrison 2009; Escribà-Folch 2013; Davenport, RezaeeDaryakenari, and Wood 2021).

Coups, a significant aspect of irregular leadership transitions, have received considerable scholarly attention. Research has examined coup prevention strategies (J. Powell 2017; Sudduth 2017; De Bruin 2020). Studies have explored the impact of coups on leadership and the subsequent actions of coup leaders Easton and Siverson (2018).

However, a significant gap remains in the literature regarding the comparison of leadership survival between coup-installed and autocoup leaders. This study aims to address this gap by investigating and comparing the duration of leadership survival for these two leader types.

By focusing on the comparison between coup-installed and autocoup leaders, this study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of political survival in irregular leadership transitions. This approach may offer valuable insights into the complex dynamics of leader longevity across different political contexts.

4.3 Survival dynamics of autocoup and coup-installed leaders

Studying leadership survival in political systems is challenging due to the opacity and diverse mechanisms of power transitions. These challenges, however, underscore the significance of this research, as it illuminates understudied dynamics in political leadership. Although the survival of political leaders is complex and varied, some patterns do emerge. Leaders of similar types often exhibit similar characteristics, allowing for meaningful analysis.

4.3.1 Key definitions and scope

Before delving into the comparison, it is essential to clarify several key terminologies:

- **Coup and autocoup**: These terms are defined consistently with previous chapters to ensure clarity and consistency throughout the study.

- **Tenure length threshold**: To ensure meaningful analysis, this study focuses on leaders with substantial periods in power, applying a six-month threshold to both autocoup and coup-installed leaders. This criterion filters out ephemeral leadership episodes, allowing for a more robust examination of survival dynamics.

- **Autocoup leader**: An incumbent leader who successfully employs illegitimate or unconstitutional means to extend their tenure in power. This definition encompasses various methods of power consolidation that circumvent established democratic processes or constitutional limits.

- **Coup-installed leader**: The individual who assumes power after a successful coup, regardless of their role in the coup itself. This broad definition allows for the inclusion of both coup instigators and those selected to lead post-coup, providing a comprehensive view of leadership dynamics following forceful regime change.

This study focuses on comparing the post-autocoup tenure of autocoup leaders with the post-coup tenure of coup-installed leaders. This comparative approach is motivated by the relevance and similarity of these leader types in terms of illegitimacy, uncertainty, and instability. By examining these parallel yet distinct paths to power, we can gain insights into the factors that influence leadership longevity in irregular leadership transitions.

4.3.2 Challenges in power consolidation

Both autocoup and coup-installed leaders confront distinct challenges in consolidating their power, primarily stemming from the varying intensity of issues related to illegitimacy, uncertainty, and instability. This disparity creates an uneven playing field in terms of power dynamics, placing coup-installed leaders at a significant disadvantage. Table 4.1 provides a comparative overview of the main features of autocoup and coup-installed leaders, highlighting these key differences.

Table 4.1: Main features of autocoup and coup-installed leaders

Feature	Autocoup Leader	Coup Entry Leader
Illegitimacy	Normally attained through lawful procedures, but lacking consensus legitimacy	Blatantly illegal
Uncertainty	Initially with some certainty, but decreases as the leader's age grows or health worsens	Significant uncertainty initially
Instability	Relatively stable	Unstable except when a strongman emerges or constitutional institutions are established
Balance of Power	Generally in a better position of power	Initially unclear and challenging to establish a balance

Illegitimacy

While both types of leaders suffer from a legitimacy deficit, the nature and perception of this deficit differ significantly:

- **Coup-installed leaders**: Their illegitimacy is blatant and unambiguous, stemming from the overt and often violent seizure of power. This overt act undermines pre-existing norms and institutions, generating immediate domestic and international condemnation.

- **Autocoup leaders**: In contrast, autocoup leaders employ a more subtle and deceptive strategy, manipulating legal processes and institutions to create a façade of democratic legitimacy. This veneer of legality, while often thin, can provide a degree of cover and buy time for consolidating power.

Uncertainty

The irregular paths to power for both types of leaders create uncertainty about the longevity of their rule and the mechanisms of their eventual departure. However, the levels and sources of this uncertainty differ significantly.

- **Coup-installed leaders:** These leaders face a trifecta of uncertainties. First, the immediate aftermath of a coup often involves a struggle for power within the junta or ruling coalition, creating ambiguity about who will ultimately consolidate control. Second, the tenure of coup-installed leaders is inherently precarious, subject to internal rivalries, popular uprisings, or counter-coups. Third, the lack of established succession mechanisms further amplifies uncertainty, making it difficult to predict the transfer of power and potentially triggering future instability.

- **Autocoup leaders:** While not immune to uncertainty, autocoup leaders generally present a clearer picture. The question of who will rule post-autocoup is largely settled, as the incumbent retains power. Furthermore, many autocoup leaders openly aspire to extend

their rule indefinitely or incrementally, attempting to establish a sense of permanence. This perceived stability, whether real or manufactured, can contribute to a more predictable political environment, at least in the short term.

Instability

The awareness of shaky legitimacy and persistent uncertainty inevitably breeds insecurity and a sense of crisis, forcing both autocoup and coup-installed leaders to prioritize stabilization measures. However, the nature and intensity of these challenges differ:

- **Coup-installed leaders:** These leaders face the daunting task of rapidly reshaping power dynamics, often resorting to purges and crackdowns to eliminate potential adversaries and consolidate control. This process of dismantling existing structures and building new ones generates significant instability, potentially alienating former allies and triggering resistance from various segments of society. The need to appease powerful actors both domestically and internationally further limits their options, forcing them into compromises that can undermine their authority and long-term stability.

- **Autocoup leaders:** In contrast, autocoup leaders often benefit from a degree of continuity in regime personnel and institutions. This relative stability allows them to implement changes gradually, minimizing disruptions and mitigating potential backlash. While they may still face opposition, they are less likely to confront immediate and existential threats to their rule, providing them with more time and leverage to consolidate power.

By understanding these contrasting challenges, we can better appreciate the relative advantages and disadvantages faced by autocoup and coup-installed leaders. This comparative perspective provides a nuanced framework for analyzing the strategies these leaders employ to consolidate power and navigate the perilous terrain of irregular leadership transitions.

4.3.3 Empirical evidence and hypothesis

Empirical evidence substantiates the disadvantage faced by coup-installed leaders, revealing a complex interplay between historical precedent, power consolidation challenges, and leadership longevity. This section presents key data points and introduces the central hypothesis guiding this study.

Data analysis shows a significant correlation between the frequency of coup attempts in a country and the likelihood of future coups. Notably, over a third of coups have occurred in the top ten countries with the most attempts since 1950 (As shown in **?@tbl-coups**). This pattern suggests a self-reinforcing cycle of political instability, where each successful coup increases the probability of subsequent attempts, creating an environment of persistent uncertainty for coup-installed leaders.

The disparity in leadership longevity between autocoup and coup-installed leaders is starkly illustrated by survival data. As depicted in Figure 4.1, the average survival period following an autocoup is approximately five years longer than that of coup-installed leaders. This substantial difference in tenure length underscores the divergent challenges faced by these two types of leaders in maintaining their grip on power.

The distinct challenges faced by autocoup leaders and coup-installed leaders in consolidating power create a self-perpetuating cycle that significantly influences their tenure length:

- Coup-installed leaders: Face greater legitimacy challenges and internal instability; Struggle to attract and retain strong support; More vulnerable to internal and external challenges; Shorter average tenures reinforce perception of instability.

- Autocoup leaders: Often benefit from a veneer of legitimacy and a stronger initial position; Better able to consolidate power and attract supporters; Face less immediate threat of overthrow; Longer average tenures contribute to perception of stability.

This cycle suggests that the initial method of power acquisition or extension has far-reaching

consequences for a leader's ability to maintain their position over time.

Based on these observations and the theoretical framework outlined earlier, I propose the following hypothesis:

H4-1: Political leaders who successfully extend their tenure through autocoups are more likely to survive longer extended tenure compared to coup-installed leaders.

This hypothesis encapsulates the expected outcome of the divergent challenges and advantages faced by autocoup and coup-installed leaders. By testing this hypothesis, I aim to quantify the impact of the method of power acquisition or extension on leadership longevity, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of political survival in contexts of irregular transitions.

4.4 Research design

This section employs survival analysis to test the hypothesis that autocoup leaders have longer survival times in office compared to coup-installed leaders. This study uses Cox models to analyze the survival tenures of autocoup and coup-installed leaders, controlling for various factors that may affect their time in office.

4.4.1 Methodology: Survival analysis

Two Cox models will be employed to analyze the survival tenures of coup-installed and autocoup leaders:

- **Cox proportional hazards (PH) model**: This model uses only the variables present at the entry year, without considering changes over time.

- **Time-dependent Cox model**: This model accounts for variations in time-dependent control variables such as economic performance and political stability.

The Cox model is preferred over the Kaplan-Meier model because it enables the estimation of the impact of multiple factors. Although it does not directly estimate the duration of

tenure, it assesses the hazard rate associated with being ousted from power. This approach captures different facets of the same phenomenon: as a leader's cumulative hazard of being ousted increases, their probability of survival in office decreases.

4.4.2 Data and variables

The dependent variables include survival time and end point status:

- **Survival time:** Survival time refers to the duration of a leader's tenure, measured in days. For coup-installed leaders, the survival time begins on the day they assume power through a coup. For autocoup leaders, the survival time starts on the expiration date of their original legitimate term. For example, Russia's president Vladimir Putin assumed power in 2000 and, after serving two terms, stepped down in 2008. However, he remained in a powerful position as the prime minister and hand-picked Dmitry Medvedev to succeed him as president, while continuing to control the power behind the scenes. In this case, Putin's survival time begins in 2008, marking the start of his post-autocoup tenure. The survival time concludes on the day the leader finally exits office, applicable to both coup-installed and autocoup leaders.

- **End point status:** This variable indicates the manner in which the leader's tenure concluded, categorized as follows:

  0 = Censored: This status is assigned to leaders who leave office through regular means other than being ousted. This includes leaders transferring power to their designated successors, leaving office as their terms expire, losing in general elections, voluntarily leaving office due to health issues, or dying of natural causes.

  1 = Ousted: This status is assigned to leaders who are forced to leave office. This includes leaders resigning under pressure, being ousted by coups or other forces, or being assassinated.

The key independent variable is the leader type, which categorizes leaders into two distinct groups:

- **Group A = Autocoup leader**: Leaders who extend their tenure through autocoups.
- **Group B = Coup-installed leader**: Leaders who assume power through coups.

This variable is the primary independent variable of interest, serving as the basis for comparing the survival time between these two types of leaders.

The data for both dependent and independent variables are sourced from the autocoup dataset introduced in this study, Archigos, and PLAD.

Control variables include economic performance, political stability, population size, and the leader's age, which are consistent with the autocoup analysis in Chapter 2.

4.5   Results and discussion

4.5.1   Model results

Using the *surviavl* package in R (Therneau 2024), I present the regression results for both the Cox Proportional Hazards model (Cox PH) and the time-dependent Cox model in Table 4.2.

Both models showed a statistically significant relationship between leadership type and the hazard of removal from power. Since time-dependent Cox model use the control variables which change over time, I interpret the main findings based on time-dependent model.

Coup-installed leaders were found to have a hazard ratio of 2.23 in the time-dependent model compared to autocoup leaders (reference group), assuming all other variables in the model are held constant. This suggests that coup-installed leaders face a significantly greater risk of removal from power compared to autocoup leaders. At any given time during their tenure, coup-installed leaders are 2.23 times more likely to be ousted from power compared to autocoup leaders, all else being equal in the model.

Table 4.2: Cox models for survival time of different types of leaders

Characteristic	Cox PH Model				Time-dependent Cox Model			
	N	Event N	HR[1,2]	SE[2]	N	Event N	HR[1,2]	SE[2]
Leader Type								
Autocoup leaders	67	30	1.00	—	50	25	1.00	—
Coup-installed leaders	163	163	8.39***	0.240	167	167	1.87***	0.269
GDP Growth Trend	230	193	0.20	1.18	217	192	1.02	1.26
GDP per capita	230	193	0.99	0.011	217	192	0.93***	0.036
Population: log	230	193	1.13*	0.064	217	192	1.12**	0.065
Polity 5	230	193	0.99	0.013	217	192	0.96***	0.015
Political stability	230	193	1.05	0.042	217	192	1.12***	0.048
Age	230	193	1.03***	0.008	217	192	1.02***	0.007

[1]*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
[2]HR = Hazard Ratio, SE = Standard Error

The control variables perform differently in the two models. Economic level (GDP per capita) exhibits statistically significant effects in both models. In the time-dependent model, the hazard ratio of 0.95 indicates that for each unit increase in GDP per capita (measured in units of $10,000), the hazard (or risk) of being ousted at any given time is reduced by 5%, assuming all other variables in the model are held constant.

GDP growth trend demonstrates a more substantial effect in reducing the risk of coups. Specifically, a 1 percentage point higher economic growth trend is associated with an 80% reduction in the risk of being ousted, although this effect is only statistically significant at the 10% level. This suggests a possible trend where positive economic performance might mitigate the risk of removal from power, but the evidence is not robust enough to confirm this conclusively.

Political stability, as measured by the violence index, shows that a 1-point increase in the index correlates with an 11% higher risk of being ousted. However, this effect is also only statistically significant at the 10% level, indicating a weaker but potentially important relationship between increased violence and the risk of removal from office.

4.5.2 Discussion

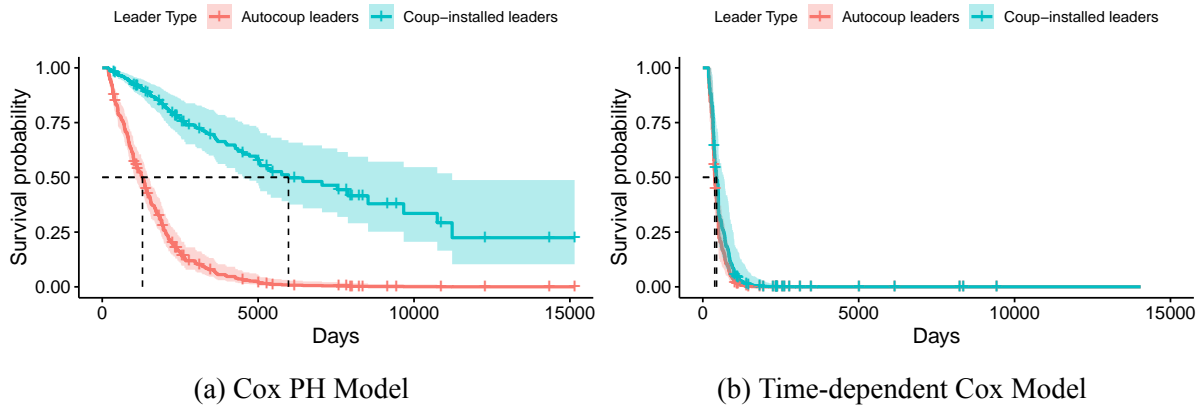

(a) Cox PH Model   (b) Time-dependent Cox Model

Figure 4.2: Survival curves for Cox Model

The survival curves in Figure 4.2 displays the survival rates for both types of leaders, high-lighting the differences in their survival curves. Both the Cox PH model and the time-dependent Cox model yield similar results. Notably, the survival curve for coup-installed leaders has a significantly lower trajectory than that of autocoup leaders. The steeper drop at the early stage for coup-installed leaders indicates they are more likely to be ousted shortly after assuming power. Additionally, the survival curve for coup-installed leaders crosses the median survival line much earlier (about 3,000 days) than that of autocoup leaders (about 8,500 days). This disparity suggests that autocoup leaders tend to remain in power for longer durations than their coup-installed counterparts.

Figure 4.3 displays the hazard ratios and corresponding 95% confidence intervals for the variables incorporated in the Cox model. Both the Cox Proportional Hazards (PH) model and the time-dependent model produce similar plots, reinforcing the robustness of the findings. Key points to note include:

- The closer the hazard ratio (represented by the dots) is to 1, the less impact the variable has on the risk of being ousted. A hazard ratio of 1 indicates no effect.

- The whiskers extending from the dots represent the 95% confidence intervals. If these

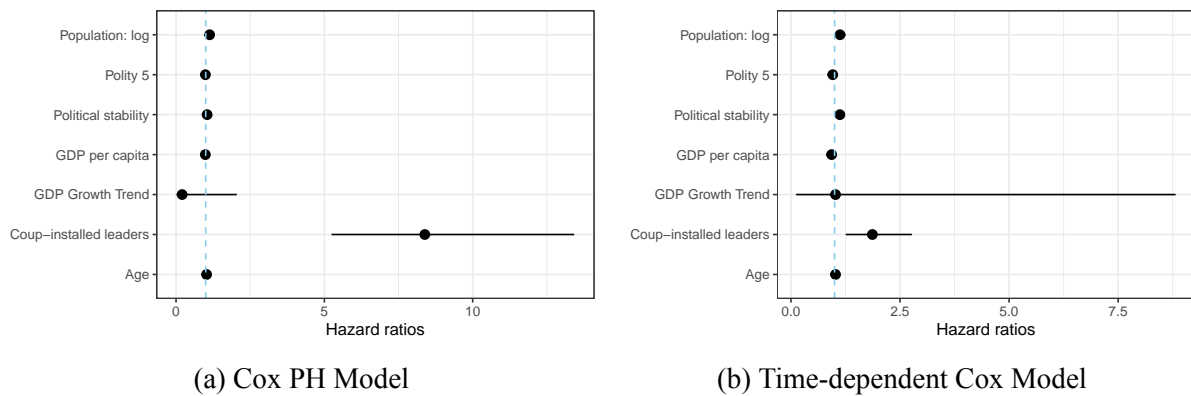(a) Cox PH Model   (b) Time-dependent Cox Model

Figure 4.3: Hazard ratios and 95% CIs for Leader Ousting

whiskers cross the vertical blue line at 1, it indicates that the variable is not statistically significant at the 5% level.

- The hazard ratio for coup-installed leaders is significantly greater than 1 and statistically significant at the 5% level. This indicates that coup-installed leaders face a substantially higher risk of being ousted compared to autocoup leaders.

- Most other variables have hazard ratios close to 1, suggesting that a one-unit increase in these variables does not significantly affect the risk of being ousted.

- Although the hazard ratio for GDP growth trend is considerably less than 1 in the time-dependent model, indicating a potential protective effect, it is not statistically significant at the 5% level. However, it is statistically significant at the 10% level, suggesting that better economic performance may help to consolidate the rule of the incumbents to some extent, albeit the evidence is not as strong.

4.5.3 Assessing the proportional hazards assumption

Assessing the proportional hazards assumption is crucial for the validity of the Cox model results. To evaluate this, we used the chi-square test based on Schoenfeld residuals to determine whether the covariate effects remain constant (proportional) over time. Although the Cox PH

model violates the proportional hazards assumption, our primary analysis relies on the time-dependent Cox model, which does not show strong evidence of violating the proportional hazards assumption for any covariate. The global p-value of 0.416 is much greater than the 5% significance level, indicating that the proportional hazards assumption is reasonably met for the time-dependent Cox model.

4.6 Summary

This chapter explores the survival durations of political leaders who come to power through unconventional means, specifically focusing on coups and autocoups. Based on the hypothesis that the mode of accession affects leader tenure, I use survival analysis techniques, including the Cox proportional hazards model and a time-dependent Cox model, to investigate this phenomenon. The findings suggest that autocoup leaders tend to have longer tenures than coup-installed leaders.

Empirical analysis reveals a significant disparity in tenure length: leaders who assume power via autocoup remain in office for an average of 11 years, compared to just 5.6 years for those installed by coups. Moreover, the time-dependent Cox model indicates that coup-installed leaders are 2.23 times more likely to be ousted from power at any given time compared to their autocoup counterparts, all other factors being equal. These findings underscore the importance of understanding the autocoup as a mechanism through which leaders extend their rule by manipulating legal frameworks and weakening institutional constraints.

The implications of these findings are profound. The relative ease and potential rewards of an autocoup could incentivize more leaders to resort to this method of power retention, particularly in fragile democracies or transitioning regimes. Consequently, democratic backsliding may become more prevalent, as autocoups erode democratic institutions and undermine constitutional norms.

This study contributes significantly to the literature on political leadership survival by show-

ing that the mode of accession has a substantial impact on leader tenure, an aspect that has received limited attention in previous research. Methodologically, this work advances the field by applying robust survival analysis techniques, including both Cox models, to provide a nuanced understanding of the dynamics that influence leadership stability.

However, the study is not without limitations. The analysis relies on an autocoup dataset that was collected and coded by the author, a relatively novel concept in the academic sphere. As the understanding and recognition of "autocoup" as a term continue to evolve, future research should refine and expand the dataset. Incorporating additional cases and cross-referencing with other forms of irregular leadership transitions would contribute to a more comprehensive view of political survival under such conditions.

In conclusion, this chapter highlights the need for more refined approaches to studying political tenure and irregular power retention. By offering valuable insights into the dynamics of political stability and the risks associated with non-democratic leadership transitions, this research emphasizes the importance of continued investigation into the complex relationships between power, legitimacy, and survival in political leadership.

Chapter 5

Coups, Autocoups, and Democracy

Abstract

This chapter explores the impact of autocoups on political institutions, drawing comparisons with traditional coups through an analysis of changes in Polity scores. I contend that, first, incumbent leaders frequently consolidate power by undermining established institutions in anticipation of an autocoup, resulting in a decline in Polity scores even prior to the event. Second, unlike coups, which produce mixed outcomes regarding democratization, autocoups almost invariably lead to democratic backsliding or authoritarian entrenchment, as they are specifically designed to dismantle institutional checks, enabling leaders to maintain power for significantly longer periods than those installed via coups.

Employing a country-fixed effects model and utilizing datasets on both autocoups and coups, this study reveals that Polity scores decline both preceding and following an autocoup, while coups tend to trigger an immediate decrease that may allow for some degree of democratic recovery over time. These findings underscore the divergent political trajectories associated with coups and autocoups. This research not only addresses a critical gap in the empirical analysis of autocoups but also significantly raises awareness within academic and policy-making circles regarding their potential adverse effects, including democratic backsliding and further

authoritarian deterioration.

5.1 Introduction

In the preceding chapters, I clarified the definition of an autocoup, introduced a novel dataset on autocoups, conducted empirical analyses on the determinants of autocoup attempts, and compared the post-event survival times of leaders established through coups versus autocoup leaders. A natural follow-up question emerges: What are the broader impacts of autocoups? Specifically, from a political science perspective, how do autocoups affect the process of democratization?

As previously noted, due to the absence of a widely recognized dataset on autocoups, most existing discussions on their impact have relied on case studies (Baturo and Elgie, n.d.; Baturo and Tolstrup 2022). To move beyond case-specific analyses and adopt a more systematic and comparative approach, this chapter aims to pioneer empirical research on the democratic consequences of autocoups. The first objective of this chapter, therefore, is to examine whether autocoups reinforce authoritarianism, promote democratization, or have no significant effect on political regimes.

Given the conceptual and empirical connections between coups and autocoups, another key objective is to compare their respective effects on democratization. While both events disrupt existing political orders, their immediate and long-term consequences may vary significantly. Understanding these distinctions is essential for evaluating their broader implications.

To address these questions, this study leverages data from a widely recognized coup dataset alongside a newly compiled dataset on autocoups. Employing a fixed-effects model, it evaluates their effects on democracy, as measured by the Polity Index. The findings reveal that both coups and autocoups lead to an immediate decline in democratic levels. However, coups have a more pronounced negative short-term impact. Notably, three years after these events, democracies affected by coups tend to show significant recovery, whereas those experiencing autocoups

exhibit no meaningful improvement.

This study offers two significant contributions to the field of political science. First, it provides the inaugural empirical analysis of the impact of autocoups on democratization, effectively addressing a critical gap in the existing literature. Second, by directly comparing the effects of coups and autocoups, this research highlights autocoups as a distinct phenomenon that demands increased scholarly inquiry and policy focus.

The remainder of this chapter is structured as follows: Section 2 analyzes the impact of autocoups on democratization, by comparing the effects with traditional coups. Section 3 outlines the research design, methodology, and variables used in this study. Section 4 presents and interprets the empirical findings, followed by a discussion of their implications. Finally, Section 5 concludes by summarizing the key results and exploring their significance for understanding and mitigating the occurrence of autocoups.

5.2   Impact of autocoups on political change

According to the definition in **?@sec-definition**, an autocoup refers to an incumbent leader extending their tenure in power beyond the originally mandated limits, whether through legal or illegal means. While the leader may assume a different title or position, the individual in power remains unchanged. Therefore, unlike traditional coups, an autocoup does not result in real leadership turnover, elite restructuring, or regime change. In other words, the fundamental ruling structure remains intact.

This distinction has important implications. Since regime change rarely occurs following an autocoup, its impact on politics cannot be assessed using conventional methods. Typically, studies on coups and democratization measure their effects by estimating the probability of regime transition—either from autocracy to democracy or vice versa—as seen in previous research on coup outcomes (C. L. Thyne and Powell 2014; Derpanopoulos et al. 2016; Miller 2016). However, this approach is not suitable for autocoups, as they do not directly trigger

regime transfers.

Although autocoups rarely lead to formal regime change, this does not mean they have no impact on political dynamics. In fact, they inevitably shape political trajectories in various ways and, on occasion, can even lead to significant transformations. Therefore, a more appropriate method for assessing the political impact of autocoups is to analyze democratic indices, such as those measured by Polity5 (Monty G. Marshall and Gurr 2020). The Polity Score, ranging from -10 (full autocracy) to +10 (full democracy), captures gradual shifts in political regime characteristics rather than abrupt transitions. Thus, even if an autocoup does not result in a formal regime change, subtle shifts in political openness and institutional constraints can still be assessed by examining variations in Polity scores before and after the event. This approach has also been employed in previous studies (Dahl and Gleditsch 2023).

Although autocoups may not lead to significant regime change, their impact on democratization should not be overlooked. However, their influence differs from that of traditional coups in at least two key ways.

5.2.1 The pre-emptive effects of autocoups on political dynamics

First and foremost, unlike coups, which are marked by clear, decisive events—such as the removal of a leader—autocoups typically unfold gradually, through incremental steps rather than a singular, dramatic event. Incumbent leaders seeking to extend their tenure often lay the groundwork well in advance before executing their final move to remain in power. To reduce resistance and opposition, they engage in extensive preparation, which may include purging officials, suppressing political opposition, cracking down on dissent and protests, and restricting press freedom. Without such measures, an autocoup might face strong internal resistance, and in the worst case, provoke a backlash that not only derails the leader's attempt to extend their rule but also results in their immediate removal from office.

However, once an incumbent successfully secures an extension of their rule, continued re-

pression is not always necessary. On the contrary, some leaders relax political pressure to ease internal dissent and mitigate opposition from external actors. This adaptive approach helps maintain stability after the autocoup is complete.

As a result, the primary impact of autocoups on political change is often reflected in shifts in political scores before the final stage of the autocoup is enacted. Once the process is completed, further shifts may be minimal. In contrast, coup plotters, unlike incumbents, lack the ability to influence political institutions beforehand, meaning their impact on politics is often felt in the aftermath rather than before the event.

This distinction is evident in empirical cases of autocoups.

One of the most frequently cited examples of an autocoup is Peru's 1992 case, in which President Alberto Fujimori dissolved Congress, temporarily suspended the 1979 Constitution, and ruled by decree until November of that year, when a *Democratic Constituent Congress* was elected to draft a new constitution (Maxwell A. Cameron 1998b). However, these moves did not immediately grant Fujimori a longer tenure in office.

Under the 1979 Peruvian Constitution, immediate presidential re-election was prohibited. To bypass this restriction, Fujimori initiated a constitutional overhaul, leading to the adoption of a new constitution in 1993, which permitted re-election. Consequently, he secured a second term in 1995 (Baturo 2019).

An analysis of Peru's Polity5 scores during this process reflects these political changes. Upon taking office in 1990, Peru's Polity score was 8, remaining unchanged in 1991. However, a dramatic shift occurred in 1992, when Fujimori dissolved Congress, causing the Polity score to plummet from 8 to -4. Interestingly, when he formally extended his rule by amending the constitution in 1993, the score rebounded slightly to -1. This -1 score remained unchanged throughout Fujimori's tenure until 2000, indicating a lack of further institutional transformation after the constitutional amendment.

A similar pattern emerges in Belarus under Alexander Lukashenko. Upon assuming office as president in 1994, Belarus had a Polity5 score of 8. However, in 1995, when Lukashenko

moved to hold a referendum—defying opposition in the Supreme Council and threatening to suspend its activities—the score dropped sharply to 0. Following the 1996 referendum, which extended his term by two additional years, Lukashenko officially overstayed his tenure. Consequently, the Polity5 score further declined to -7 in 1996, where it has remained ever since, despite two additional term extensions (Ash 2014; Baturo and Elgie, n.d.).

These cases illustrate a broader pattern: the impact of autocoups on political change is often reflected before the final stage of the autocoup is enacted, whereas the impact of coups tends to materialize afterwards, as have been fully discussed by previous studies.

Based on this analysis, I propose the first hypothesis:

H1: Autocoups primarily shape political change in advance, whereas coups typically drive political change only after they are executed.

5.2.2 The singular nature of autocoups

Secondly, in contrast to the ambiguous nature of coups (Dahl and Gleditsch 2023), the impact of autocoups on political change rarely contributes to democratization.

The influence of coups on democratization has been extensively examined in existing literature. Some scholars argue that coups—and even the mere threat of them—can act as catalysts for democratization. One argument suggests that coups deliver a political "shock" that may create opportunities for liberalization that would not have otherwise materialized (C. L. Thyne and Powell 2014). In a critical examination, Derpanopoulos et al. (2016) questioned the role of coups in promoting democracy, engaging in multiple rounds of debate with Miller (2016). More recently, Dahl and Gleditsch (2023) further explored this ongoing discussion, arguing that both democratic and autocratic transitions are likely to follow a coup, with popular mobilization playing a decisive role in shaping post-coup trajectories.

A frequently cited example of a "pro-democracy coup" occurred in February 2010, when Nigerien troops ousted President Mamadou Tandja after he extended his rule autocratically.

The Supreme Council for the Restoration of Democracy (CSRD) took control, pledging demo-cratic reforms. Their actions were widely celebrated, with both citizens and political opposition viewing the coup as an opportunity to restore democracy. The CSRD fulfilled its commitment by overseeing free and fair elections in 2011, resulting in Mahamadou Issoufou assuming the presidency (Miller 2016).

While the debate on the democratic consequences of coups remains ongoing, it is evident that their impact is not uniform. In contrast, autocoups almost never lead to democratic tran-sitions, nor do they even marginally enhance political freedoms. This stems from the intrinsic nature of autocoups, which disrupt the established process of political leadership transition, particularly term limits.

Term limits are constitutional provisions that restrict the maximum duration a leader can remain in office. They play a crucial role in both democracies and autocracies by preventing the excessive concentration of power and ensuring political stability. In democracies, term limits promote accountability, leadership renewal, and reduce the risks of corruption and au-thoritarian entrenchment. In autocracies, when enforced, they can curb indefinite rule, mitigate succession crises, and provide rare opportunities for political transitions. However, without term limits, leaders can entrench themselves in power, undermining institutions and hindering political progress.

As shown in Table 2.2 in Chapter 3, autocoups are executed through either façade legal mechanisms or blatantly illegal methods. This includes amending or disregarding term limits, delaying or cancelling elections, rigging electoral outcomes, or outright refusing to accept elec-tion results. While many autocoups maintain a veneer of legality, their defining characteristic is the violation of term limits, which are intended as safeguards against prolonged and unchecked rule.

As previously discussed, before an incumbent leader formally overstays their term, they often inflict significant damage on political institutions. Furthermore, to secure their prolonged rule, they are unlikely to fully restore political freedoms even if they temporarily ease political

repression once they have consolidated power.

Case studies from Peru and Belarus illustrate how autocoups lead to a decline in Polity scores, reflecting democratic backsliding. However, most autocoups occur in already autocratic regimes where Polity scores are low. This aligns with trends observed in coups, which also primarily occur in autocracies.

For instance, in China's 2018 constitutional amendment, Xi Jinping abolished presidential term limits, effectively allowing himself to remain in power indefinitely[1]. However, China's Polity score remained unchanged at -7 before and after the amendment. This pattern is common in autocratic regimes with Polity scores below -6, as they already lack significant democratic features, leaving little room for further decline.

While most autocoups occur in low-Polity-score countries, some have taken place in relatively democratic settings, where the Polity score remains stable despite term limit extensions. This is particularly evident in Latin America, where presidents have amended "no immediate re-election" rules to allow for a second consecutive term, but voluntarily stepped down afterwards. Examples include: Argentina (1993), Polity score remained at 7; Brazil (1997), Polity score remained at 8, Colombia (2004), Polity score remained at 7. In these cases, leaders extended their tenure within a structured political framework without further dismantling democratic institutions (Baturo 2019).

Across all cases—whether in Peru, Belarus, China, Argentina, Brazil, or Colombia—there is no instance where a Polity score increased following an autocoup. In the autocoup dataset which I introduced in Chapter 3, only four cases—Guinea-Bissau (1988), Burkina Faso (1997), Congo-Brazzaville (2001), and Lebanon (2004)—saw minor increases in Polity scores, but the changes were insignificant.

Thus, unlike some coup leaders who justify their actions by claiming to restore democracy (as seen in Niger's 2010 case), leaders who execute autocoups lack any democratic justification.

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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.

If their true intention were to advance democracy, they would transfer power peacefully rather than violate term limits.

Based on this analysis, I propose the second hypothesis:

H2: Autocoups are more likely to entrench autocracy than coups.

5.3   Methodology and variables

5.3.1   Methodology

As discussed earlier, autocoups are less likely to result in full regime transitions—either from democracy to autocracy or vice versa. Therefore, it is inappropriate to assess their effects solely based on regime transitions or changes that cross a critical threshold. Instead, this study examines political changes through fluctuations in Polity5 scores.

Unlike coup analysis, which primarily focuses on post-event effects, this study examines both pre-event and post-event impacts of autocoups. Specifically, pre-event effects are measured by the change in Polity5 scores three years before the autocoup compared to the year of the autocoup, expressed as:

$Polity_t - Polity_{t-3}$

Post-event effects are measured by the change in Polity5 scores three years after the autocoup compared to the year of the autocoup, expressed as:

$Polity_{t+3} - Polity_t$

The three-year window is chosen for two key reasons. Pre-event political changes typically occur incrementally, as incumbents consolidate power gradually over several years rather than through a single, abrupt action. Post-event analysis focuses on medium-term effects rather than short-term shocks, as autocoups rarely trigger immediate regime transitions and instead reinforce existing political structures. Short-term fluctuations may be too minor to capture meaningful institutional change empirically.

To estimate how political institutions change before and after autocoups, I employ a linear model with country-case fixed effects. For pre-event effects, I analyze attempted autocoups, since before the event, no one knows whether the autocoup will succeed or fail.

For post-event effects, I analyze only successful autocoups for three reasons: The majority of autocoups succeed (87 out of 110 cases); failed autocoups tend to produce immediate political shocks, rather than medium- or long-term effects; failed autocoups are often followed by major disruptive events, such as coups, insurrections, or mass protests, making it difficult to isolate their impact. For example, in Niger's case, a failed autocoup in 2009 was followed by a coup in 2010, creating overlapping political effects. In contrast, successful autocoups provide a clearer analytical framework, as their effects are less entangled with other disruptions, allowing for a more systematic assessment of institutional change.

5.3.2   Variables

This study uses a global sample of all country-year data from 1950 to 2020, applying a linear model to examine the effects of autocoups on political change. The dependent variable is the change in Polity scores, while the main independent variable is autocoups. The dataset includes approximately 7,500 observations.

The dependent variable measures political change using three-year differences in Polity scores. Model 1 (Pre-event effects): $Polity_t - Polity_{t-3}$. Model 2 (Post-event effects): $Polity_{t+3} - Polity_t$.

The Polity score ranges from -10 (full autocracy) to 10 (full democracy). Some values in the dataset, such as -66, -77, and -88, represent transitional regimes or special periods. To prevent excessive data loss, I replace these values with the closest valid Polity scores. This approach ensures that the model captures all changes in Polity scores, rather than focusing solely on transitions that cross a democratic threshold.

The main independent variable is autocoups, as introduced in Chapter 3. The dataset in-

cludes110 attempted autocoups (used for pre-event analysis) and 87 successful autocoups (used for post-event analysis). For pre-event analysis, the autocoup variable is binary, where: 1 indicates the presence of an attempted autocoup and 0 indicates no autocoup event.

For post-event analysis, I apply decay functions to account for both immediate and delayed effects, following the methodology of Dahl and Gleditsch (2023). To assess the persistence of autocoup effects, I consider a half-life specification of five years, analysing the impact from the autocoup year (y_t) to four years after (y_{t+4}).

I also include traditional coups as a secondary independent variable for two reasons. Comparative significance: It is essential to compare the effects of autocoups and coups. Overlapping events: In many cases, coups and autocoups are interconnected, as autocoups can trigger coups. Distinguishing their effects is necessary for a clear empirical analysis.

As in previous chapters, I use the coup dataset from Powell and Thyne (2011). To maintain consistency, I apply the same methodological approach to coups as to autocoups: Binary coding for pre-event effects and decay function coding for post-event effects.

Control variables include economic performance, political stability, and population size, all of which have been analysed in previous chapters. Additionally, I incorporate two dummy variables. The first, **"non_democracy,"** accounts for regime type, recognizing that non-democratic regimes with Polity scores below -6 have limited room for further decline, while democracies with scores above 6 are less likely to experience significant increases. The second, **"cold_war,"** follows the approach used in prior studies on the impact of coups on democratization (C. L. Thyne and Powell 2014; Derpanopoulos et al. 2016; Dahl and Gleditsch 2023) and accounts for the Cold War period. This variable captures the observable trend of declining Polity scores from the 1960s to 1990, followed by an upward shift after 1990.

5.4 Results and discussion

5.4.1 Pre-event effects

Initially, I analyse the trajectory of Polity scores leading up to these events. As presented in Table 5.1, columns 1 and 2 display the empirical results for pre-event effects, examining changes over two years (model 1) and three years (model 2) prior to the event. Consistent with the first hypothesis, Polity scores exhibit a significant decline in the 2–3 years preceding an autocoup. Notably, this downward trend is both more pronounced and statistically significant for autocoups compared to traditional coups.

Column 1 examines the pre-event changes, specifically the difference between Polity scores at time $t-1$ and $t-3$ ($Polity_{t-1} - Polity_{t-3}$). The results reveal a statistically significant decrease in Polity scores prior to autocoups. On average, Polity scores decline by 0.45 in the two years before an autocoup, holding other factors constant. In contrast, no significant changes are observed before traditional coups, indicating that pre-coup periods do not measurably affect democratization levels.

Column 2 assesses the cumulative impact from three years prior to the event year, calculated as $Polity_t - Polity_{t-3}$. As previously discussed, the year of an autocoup or coup witnesses a substantial shock to political institutions. Consequently, both types of events result in a decline in Polity scores relative to three years earlier. However, the negative effect of autocoups is more severe. Polity scores decline by an average of 1.53 in the three years leading up to an autocoup, compared to 1.27 for coups, all else being equal. This disparity reinforces our hypothesis that autocoups have a more detrimental pre-event effect on democratic institutions as incumbents overextend their legitimate tenure.

Table 5.1: The Impact of Autocoups on Democratization(1950–2018): OLS with country-fixed effects

	Dependent variable: Differences of Polity scores			
	Pre-event effects		Post-event effects	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Autocoup	−0.449*	−1.488***	−0.244	−0.382**
	(0.248)	(0.294)	(0.152)	(0.168)
Coup	0.012	−1.280***	0.483***	0.713***
	(0.129)	(0.153)	(0.077)	(0.104)
GDP per Capita	−0.008**	−0.010**	−0.010**	−0.011**
	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Economic Trend	−0.356	−0.840*	−0.498	−0.581
	(0.365)	(0.435)	(0.437)	(0.436)
Log Population	0.689***	1.019***	1.175***	1.165***
	(0.100)	(0.120)	(0.121)	(0.121)
Political Violence	0.020	0.034	0.026	0.027
	(0.020)	(0.023)	(0.023)	(0.023)
Non-Democracy	1.679***	2.447***	2.408***	2.427***
	(0.087)	(0.104)	(0.105)	(0.105)
Cold War	−0.228***	−0.227**	−0.213**	−0.223**
	(0.088)	(0.104)	(0.104)	(0.104)
Observations	8,926	8,761	8,761	8,761
R^2	0.048	0.081	0.075	0.076
Adjusted R^2	0.029	0.062	0.056	0.057
F Statistic	55.534***	94.723***	87.342***	88.769***

Note: $^*p<0.1$; $^{**}p<0.05$; $^{***}p<0.01$

5.4.2 Post-event effects

Columns 3 and 4 present the empirical results for post-event effects, analysing changes in Polity scores following attempted (column 3) and successful (column 4) autocoups.

Column 3 examines the impact of attempted autocoups. The results indicate that attempted autocoups do not have a statistically significant effect on Polity scores. This contrasts with coup attempts, which lead to an average increase of 0.48 in Polity scores over three years, all else being equal.

Column 4 evaluates the impact of successful autocoups. In contrast to attempted autocoups, successful autocoups demonstrate a significant negative effect on Polity scores, with an average decline of 0.33 over three years, holding other factors constant. Conversely, successful coups continue to exhibit positive effects on democratization, resulting in an average increase of 0.72.

These findings yield several key insights. First, while both successful and attempted coups influence Polity scores, only successful autocoups produce statistically significant effects—and exclusively in a negative direction. Second, the impact of coups on democratization is more nuanced. Although post-coup Polity scores may improve, the pre-coup period often involves significant democratic backsliding. My models indicate that, on average, the democratic gains following a coup fail to offset the losses incurred before it.

5.4.3 Effects of control variables

To ensure robust results, I incorporated several control variables into the models. While economic trends and political violence do not exhibit statistically significant effects on Polity scores, other factors warrant further discussion.

The impact of the Cold War is relatively straightforward. As outlined in the research design section, global democracy experienced a general decline during the Cold War period. Consistent with this trend, all four models indicate that the Cold War era is associated with an average decrease of 0.23 in Polity scores.

The effects of GDP per capita, population size, and regime type, however, present a more complex pattern. Counter-intuitively, higher GDP per capita correlates with lower Polity scores, whereas non-democratic regimes and larger populations correspond with positive changes in Polity scores. This pattern may be explained by considering baseline differences between democracies and non-democracies. In established democracies, Polity scores are already high, leaving limited room for further increases. These countries also tend to have higher GDP per capita and lower birth rates, further reinforcing stability in their democratic scores. In contrast, non-democracies start from lower Polity scores, providing greater potential for upward movement. Given that authoritarian regimes often exhibit weaker economic performance and higher population growth rates, their Polity scores may increase as they undergo political transitions or reforms.

Taken together, these results support both hypotheses. First, the primary effects of auto-coups on Polity scores manifest before the events occur. Second, whereas coups have ambiguous consequences for democratization, the effects of autocoups are unidirectional—consistently negative.

5.4.4 Robustness tests

To assess the sensitivity of my key findings to model specifications, I conduct a series of robustness tests. The results indicate that the findings remain consistent across these variations.

First, I compare the effects of autocoups over a period ranging from one to five years after the event. The results show that the effects of coups are positive and statistically significant throughout all five years, with a general trend of increasing magnitude as time progresses. In contrast, the effects of autocoups are negative across all five years but reach statistical significance only three years after the event. This finding aligns with the earlier hypothesis: autocoups never contribute to an increase in Polity scores.

Second, I refine the treatment of autocoups by replacing the decay effects of autocoups

Table 5.2: The Impact of Autocoups on Democratization: one to five years

	Dependent variable: Differences of Polity scores				
	Years after the event				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Autocoup	−0.179*	−0.230	−0.382**	−0.343*	−0.368*
	(0.101)	(0.141)	(0.168)	(0.191)	(0.208)
Coup	0.192***	0.436***	0.713***	0.777***	0.860***
	(0.064)	(0.088)	(0.104)	(0.117)	(0.128)
GDP per Capita	−0.005	−0.009**	−0.011**	−0.012**	−0.012*
	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Economic Trend	−0.093	−0.292	−0.581	−0.743	−0.672
	(0.261)	(0.364)	(0.436)	(0.491)	(0.538)
Log Population	0.334***	0.721***	1.165***	1.625***	2.086***
	(0.071)	(0.100)	(0.121)	(0.137)	(0.152)
Political Violence	0.007	0.017	0.027	0.037	0.056*
	(0.014)	(0.020)	(0.023)	(0.026)	(0.029)
Non-Democracy	0.883***	1.684***	2.427***	3.163***	3.796***
	(0.063)	(0.087)	(0.105)	(0.118)	(0.130)
Cold War	−0.165***	−0.230***	−0.223**	−0.171	−0.080
	(0.063)	(0.088)	(0.104)	(0.117)	(0.128)
Observations	9,098	8,930	8,761	8,592	8,424
R^2	0.026	0.051	0.076	0.101	0.121
Adjusted R^2	0.007	0.032	0.057	0.082	0.103
F Statistic	30.222***	58.691***	88.769***	117.893***	142.550***

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 5.3: The Impact of Autocoups on Democratization: Dummy autocoups

	Dependent variable: Differences of Polity scores			
	Attempted		Succeeded	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Autocoup	−0.296	−0.542*	−0.428	−0.730**
	(0.247)	(0.296)	(0.271)	(0.324)
Coup	0.718***	0.842***	0.952***	1.359***
	(0.133)	(0.158)	(0.182)	(0.216)
GDP per Capita	−0.012**	−0.015**	−0.012**	−0.016***
	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.006)
Economic Trend	−0.482	−1.115**	−0.551	−1.183**
	(0.414)	(0.499)	(0.414)	(0.498)
Log Population	0.833***	1.309***	0.821***	1.305***
	(0.121)	(0.146)	(0.121)	(0.146)
Political Violence	0.003	0.019	0.005	0.019
	(0.021)	(0.026)	(0.021)	(0.026)
Regime: Dominant-party	1.553***	2.028***	1.576***	2.049***
	(0.144)	(0.173)	(0.144)	(0.172)
Military	−1.317***	−1.921***	−1.315***	−1.925***
	(0.152)	(0.183)	(0.152)	(0.183)
Monarchy	0.185	0.350**	0.203	0.370**
	(0.135)	(0.162)	(0.135)	(0.162)
Personal	−1.112***	−1.662***	−1.116***	−1.671***
	(0.133)	(0.161)	(0.133)	(0.161)
Cold War	−0.200**	−0.193*	−0.206**	−0.200*
	(0.097)	(0.116)	(0.097)	(0.116)
Observations	7,808	7,653	7,808	7,653
R^2	0.071	0.099	0.071	0.100
Adjusted R^2	0.051	0.078	0.051	0.080
F Statistic	53.250***	74.406***	53.222***	75.777***

| Note: | | | *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01 |

with a dummy variable that distinguishes between attempted and successful autocoups. Additionally, I disaggregate the 'Non-democracy' category into specific regime types—democracy, dominant-party, military, monarchy, and personal—consistent with the analysis of coup determinants, setting democracy as the reference category.

Columns 1 and 2 in Table 5.3 examine the effects of attempted autocoups, measured two and three years after the event, respectively, while Columns 3 and 4 focus on successful autocoups. As in previous models, these adjustments do not alter the core findings across all four models. However, while they lead to differences in regression coefficients, the results consistently show that Polity scores decline following autocoups in all models, in contrast to the increase observed after coups.

Comparing Columns 3 and 4 in Table 5.3 and Table 5.1, it becomes evident that replacing the decay factor for autocoups and coups with a dummy variable significantly amplifies the estimated effects—nearly doubling them. This result aligns with expectations, as the decay factor distributes the influence of events over subsequent years, whereas the event dummy captures their impact exclusively in the year of occurrence.

Furthermore, Table 5.3 reveals distinct regime-specific variations. Military regimes exhibit the largest increase in Polity scores, followed by monarchies and personalist regimes, with dominant-party regimes showing the smallest but still statistically significant positive effect compared to democracies. This finding corroborates the results in Chapter 2, which indicate that military and personalist regimes are more prone to coups. The analysis in this chapter proves that Polity scores increase significantly following coups.

5.5   Summary

This chapter examines the impact of autocoups on political institutions, particularly in contrast to coups, by analysing their effects on changes in Polity scores. It tests two central hypotheses: first, that unlike coups, the effects of autocoups on Polity scores manifest primarily before the

event, indicating that leaders consolidate power in anticipation of their autocoups; and second, that while coups produce ambiguous effects—sometimes leading to democratization and other times reinforcing authoritarianism, as suggested by previous literature—autocoups consistently result in democratic backsliding or authoritarian entrenchment.

To evaluate these hypotheses, the chapter employs multiple robustness checks, including varying time horizons, alternative model specifications, and different variable treatments. A key finding is that Polity scores begin to decline in the years leading up to an autocoup, underscoring a pre-emptive process of authorization. In contrast, coups initially cause a sharp drop in Polity scores due to the shock of leadership change, but over time, scores often rise, suggesting that in some cases, coups can contribute to an improvement in the level of democracy. These findings highlight the fundamentally different political trajectories triggered by coups and autocoups.

The implications of these results are significant for both academic research and political practice. While coups have long been a focal point of democratization studies, this chapter argues that autocoups demand equal, if not greater, attention due to their systematic role in reversing democratic progress. Unlike coups, which can sometimes serve as catalysts for political reform, autocoups almost always reinforce authoritarianism, weakening institutions and eroding democratic governance. This underscores the urgent need for scholars and policy-makers to closely monitor the conditions that enable autocoups and their broader consequences for democratic stability.

Methodologically, this chapter contributes to the study of political transitions by demonstrating the importance of pre-event trends in analysing regime change. It also highlights the necessity of distinguishing between different types of irregular power transitions when assessing their long-term effects. While the findings reinforce the study's core arguments, they also raise questions for future research—particularly regarding leader survival. As shown in Chapter 4, autocoup leaders tend to survive in power for nearly 11 years on average, while coup-installed leaders last only about 5 years. This suggests that coups and autocoups not only differ in their immediate effects but also have distinct long-term political consequences.

In conclusion, this chapter strengthens the argument that autocoups are a critical yet under-explored mechanism of authoritarian survival, one that warrants further investigation to fully understand its implications for global democratization and authoritarian resilience.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

6.1 Main findings

This study provides critical insights into the dynamics and implications of irregular power transitions, with a specific focus on coups and autocoups. The research illuminates the complex interplay between incumbents and challengers vying for power, yielding three key findings.

- **Coup attempt determinant**: The expected success rate significantly influences the likelihood of a coup attempt. This success rate is largely determined by the balance of power between incumbent leaders and challengers, which varies by regime type. Notably, the findings show that military regimes are approximately 277.7% more likely, and personalist regimes 94% more likely, to experience coups compared to dominant-party regimes, all else being equal.

- **Autocoup concept and dataset**: I introduce a refined concept of "autocoup", defined as an incumbent leader's refusal to relinquish power as mandated. We present the first publicly available dataset of autocoup events from 1945 to 2023, encompassing 110 attempts and 87 successful autocoups. Case studies and empirical analyses demonstrate the dataset's utility for quantitative research.

- **Leader longevity**: Survival analysis techniques reveal clear differences in leader longevity between coup-installed leaders and autocoup leaders. The findings reveal that, on average, coup-installed leaders are 2.23 times more likely to be ousted from power than autocoup leaders, all else being equal.

6.2 Policy implications

The examination of irregular power transitions and leadership survival offers a crucial perspective on the interrelated phenomena of democratic backsliding, breakdown, and autocratic intensification. The findings of this study provide logical explanations for several political trends:

- **Global democracy regression:** This study elucidates why global freedom has declined for the 18th consecutive year. Irregular power transitions, whether through coups or autocoups, inherently violate democratic norms and disrupt the trajectory toward stable democracies.

- **Within-regime democratic erosion:** The research explains why democratic backsliding often occurs within regimes (Mechkova, Lührmann, and Lindberg 2017), rather than through regime change. Democracies are becoming less liberal and autocracies less competitive, particularly due to the prevalence of autocoups since 2000 (Bermeo 2016). As discussed in Chapter 3, autocoups extend the tenure of incumbent leaders without overturning the regime itself.

- **Rise of autocoups since 2000:** The analysis also clarifies why autocoups have been on the rise since 2000. Incumbent leaders possess several strategic advantages: firstly, they have a significantly higher probability of success due to their incumbent vantages compared to coup plotters. Secondly, the consequences of failed autocoups are relatively milder than those for failed coup plotters, resulting in lower costs even if they fail. Lastly,

leaders who manage to extend their rule through an autocoup often enjoy considerably longer tenures compared to coup-installed leaders, thus benefiting more substantially.

- **Role of external pressure:** Due to the challenges of internal opposition to autocoups, where power is concentrated in the hands of incumbent leaders, external pressure from regional or international communities may play a vital role in encouraging adherence to constitutional processes of power transition. For instance, after the general election in Venezuela on July 29, 2024, at least nine Latin American countries rejected the election results and called for dialogue[1]. Although this pressure might not be effective in every case, it showcases the potential influence of the international community in discouraging future autocoup attempts.

6.3   Limitations and directions for future research

While the study offers a novel framework for analysing irregular leadership transitions, several limitations require further exploration:

- **Data refinement:** Defining and classifying autocoups 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 autocoup datasets. Future efforts should explore data harmonization techniques for more robust comparisons.

- **Democratic backsliding:** While this study establishes a connection between irregular

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[1]While the world waited for the outcome, nine Latin American countries released a joint statement urging transparency and recognition of the voters' will. The nine countries are Argentina, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay. On the morning after the election, the same group released a second statement demanding a complete review of the results in the presence of independent electoral observers (AS/COA, accessed on September 9, 2024).

power transitions and democratic backsliding, further empirical evidence is needed to solidify this link.

Future research avenues include:

- **Terminology and data collection:** Refining the "autocoup" concept and achieving wider recognition will facilitate more accurate and comprehensive data collection.

- **Dataset expansion:** Expanding the autocoup 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 significantly contributes to our understanding of irregular leadership transitions, focusing on coups and autocoups. By redefining autocoups, classifying the dataset, analysing determinants, and comparing leader longevity, I establish a robust framework for understanding irregular power transitions and leadership survival. This work deepens our comprehension of democratic resilience and political stability, providing a foundation for future research to conduct further empirical analyses based on the novel autocoup dataset and continue refining the framework.

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Appendix: Datasets

- **Coup Model Dataset**

  - **Dataset Name:** `coup_model.csv`

  - **Description:** This dataset is specifically cleaned for the coup model and contains the relevant data points necessary for analysis.

- **Autocoup Dataset**

  - **Dataset Name:** `autocoup.csv`

  - **Description:** This dataset is an original contribution of this thesis, compiled and curated by the author to support the research objectives.

- **Autocoup Model Dataset**

  - **Dataset Name:** `autocoup_model.csv`

  - **Description:** This dataset is cleaned for the autocoup model and includes the data required for the modelling process.

- **Cox Proportional Hazards (Cox PH) Model Dataset**

  - **Dataset Name:** `survival_cox_ph_model.csv`

  - **Description:** This dataset is used for the Cox Proportional Hazards model and contains the data necessary for analysing survival rates and hazard ratios.

- **Time-Dependent Cox Model Dataset**

  – **Dataset Name: `survival_cox_td_model.csv`**

  – **Description:** This dataset is cleaned for the time-dependent Cox model, incorporating variables that account for time-dependent effects in survival analysis.