Cues to Coup Plotters: Elections as Coup Triggers in Dictatorships

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Abstract

A large proportion of coup attempts in autocracies occur in the aftermath of elections, yet little systematic research exists on the topic. Drawing on recent literature on elections in autocracies, we present an argument to explain postelection coups. While we recognize that electoral institutions have the potential to stabilize autocracies, we illustrate that the election event can spark instability when incumbents reveal electoral weakness. Electoral outcomes—in the form of vote shares and opposition reactions—are signals containing information about the strength of the opposition, and indirectly about the likelihood of a successful full-scale revolution that would compromise the privileged positions of regime elites. In these situations, coups are likely to be initiated to avoid a revolution, either by serving as concessions to the opposition or by facilitating increased repression. We perform a large-*N* study that supports our argument, significantly nuancing the claim that elections stabilize autocracies.

When the chief intelligence officer of the Guatemalan presidential staff handed the official report on coup risk in 1981, the prospects of a coup attempt was divided into

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three distinct periods: from Christmas until the presidential election in early March, between the election and the inauguration of the new president, and the first six months after the election. According to this report, a potential putsch was deemed more probable in the postelection period "since many potential plot leaders would be waiting on the results of the election before being spurred to act, and because any election fraud, if sufficiently palpable, would motivate broader participation" (Demarest 2002, 146). The results declared handpicked successor General Rodríguez the winner of the military-controlled election. As the intelligence officers feared, the election was followed by electoral fraud allegations, and protesters took to the streets. Sixteen days later, current president García was ousted in a coup whereupon a new military junta headed by General Montt assumed control. The new junta enjoyed widespread popular support, as it represented a break with the previous military leadership that had been delegitimized by electoral fraud, handpicked successors, and corruption.

A different, but perhaps more infamous example of postelectoral turmoil occurred after the first round of the general election in Algeria in December 1991. When the opposition Islamic Salvation Front showed strength in the first round of the election, and looked poised for victory in the second round, the army staged a military coup, canceled the second round of the election, and forced the incumbent president Chadli Bendjedjid to resign from office in January 1992. The new regime banned the Islamic Salvation Front and persecuted its members and activists.

What these two cases have in common is that elections and their aftermath served as coup triggers. However, in spite of many such examples of postelectoral coups, very little has been done to systematically investigate the relationship between elections and coup attempts. In this article, we expand on the literature viewing elections and nominally democratic institutions in autocracies as a means to co-opt the opposition (e.g., Gandhi and Przeworski 2006, 2007), to contain pressures arising from internal regime elites (Boix and Svolik 2013; Svolik 2012), and, most closely related to our argument, as channels through which to send and receive information about the incumbent–opposition balance of power (Cheibub, Hays, and Savun 2012; Cox 2009; Little 2012; Fearon 2011). While recognizing the finding that electoral *institutions* can stabilize autocracies with a high coup risk (e.g., Gandhi and Przeworski 2006, 2007), we argue that the election *event* can increase coup risk when the election reveals that the incumbent is severely weakened. We combine aspects of all these aforementioned strands of argument to make the case that coup attempts against the dictator are initiated by regime elites in response to information yielded by elections about the cost of a coup relative to the probability of a popular uprising. When mass mobilization threatens the privileged positions of regime elites, a coup can either serve as a concession to the mobilizing opposition or as a means to open up for an increase in repression, by increasing the influence of the military or security apparatus.

The article is organized as follows: first, we present a short review of the coup literature and the literature that is concerned with the interplay between nominally

democratic institutions and the survival of autocrats. Second, we present our theoretical argument and deduce concrete expectations regarding *when* we expect postelectoral coups to occur. Third, we present a research design to test our arguments in a large-*N* study of 117 autocracies spanning the period 1950 to 2008. Fourth, we demonstrate that autocratic leaders revealing weakness in executive elections—either by an increase in support for the opposition or through mass electoral protests—are more likely to be subjected to coup attempts. This comports with our argument that incumbents are removed by regime elites to avoid a revolution and preserve their privileges in the postcoup regime.

Background

Two literatures are relevant to this study: The literature on coups and the literature on electoral institutions in autocracies. These are too vast to survey exhaustively here, but we discuss the aspects most crucial to this study in the next sections.

For clarification, we first offer a few conceptual definitions. A *coup attempt* "includes illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive," whether successful or not (Powell and Thyne 2011, 252). Furthermore, the coup event is conceptualized here as distinct from coup risk, understood as the underlying propensity for regime elites to launch an attempted overthrow against the opposition. Belkin and Schofer (2003) demonstrate that the event of a coup attempt is rare in both high- and low-risk environments. As elaborated upon subsequently, although a nontrivial risk of a putsch is ever present in authoritarian regimes, structural factors determine the magnitude of this risk.

Finally, we distinguish between a coup, in which the leadership of a regime is removed from power, and a revolution, in which the entire regime elite is ousted. In the aftermath of a coup, regime elites often keep their privileged position in society and preserve their political careers. After a revolution, on the other hand, more comprehensive societal changes are undertaken.

Previous Research on the Determinants of Coups

It is common to distinguish between structural and triggering determinants of coups. Although the distinction is not clear-cut, structural factors are conceived of as fundamental socioeconomic and historical variables that change slowly. Identified structural causes of coups include modernization, colonial institutional legacy, the size and political position of the military, the strength of civil society, the legitimacy of the government, a previous history of coups, and international influences (e.g., Belkin and Schofer 2003; Londregan and Poole 1990; Thyne 2010). Coup triggers, on the other hand, are more proximate events providing both motivation and opportunity for an attempted overthrow. Examples of such triggering events are economic

and political crises, insurgencies, or the particular grievances of individual military officers (Belkin and Schofer 2003).

Recent studies have found support for both trigger- and structural-type variables. Powell (2012) utilizes an aggregated measure of political instability including assassinations, purges, guerrilla activity, protests, riots, and strikes and finds that the higher the number of crisis incidents per year, the higher the likelihood of a coup. Powell (2012) also finds that military factors and societal instability are more important than economic factors. A more professionalized and factionalized military reduces their disposition to intervene. Devoting resources to the military signals that their organizational interests are taken into account, while counterbalancing factions reduce the opportunity for a successful overthrow. In line with this argument, Collier and Hoeffler (2006) find evidence that the military often resorts to "grand extortion" of the government, threatening to overthrow them if military resources and salaries are not increased. In countries with a low general coup risk, however, governments are free to cut military spending.

In a study focused on structural determinants of coups, Belkin and Schofer (2003) utilize measures of the strength of civil society, the legitimacy of the government, and coup history to generate an indicator of coup risk. They find that this indicator of coup risk improves the predictive accuracy of first coups and coup-proofing strategies. Moreover, regimes with a higher risk of coup attempts are more likely to counterbalance their militaries in an attempt to hinder plots. Another, simpler measure of coup risk is provided by Bueno de Mesquita, Siverson, and Woller (1992), measuring the underlying risk as number of coups in the last ten years of a country's existence. This coup trap argument was put forth by Londregan and Poole (1990) and further strengthened by the conclusions of Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza (2009, 10-11), who point out that

> leader-specific characteristics beyond time in office—such as the manner in which leaders attain office, or the number of their previous spells in office—has a strong influence on subsequent events and behavior. For example, a leader who came to power irregularly is over three times more likely to lose power in an irregular manner.

The finding that leaders brought into office by way of a coup are more likely to leave office through a coup might indicate that the popular legitimacy of the leader enters into the calculations of coup plotters, a perspective which we incorporate subsequently.

Finally, relating coups more closely to the literature on institutions under authoritarianism, Rød (2012) finds evidence that the presence of nominally democratic institutions lowers the probability of coup attempts in line with the arguments and evidence presented in Gandhi (2008), Gandhi and Przeworski (2006, 2007), and Boix and Svolik (2013). In spite of these studies, relatively little has been done to investigate the determinants of coups within the specific context of autocracies with institutions. In this article, we do so by looking at how election events in autocracies—and their immediate aftermath—impact the probability of a coup attempt.

Elections under Authoritarianism

Why do autocrats hold elections? Elections are, coupled with legislatures and political parties, thought to be fundamental pillars of democracies. While early research dismissed the institutional features of autocracies as mere ''window dressing'' (e.g., Friedrich and Brzezinski in Gandhi and Przeworski 2007, 1292), scholars have recently demonstrated that elections and other institutions are nontrivial components of the institutional workings of some dictatorships. Indeed, instead of viewing these institutions as unimportant, or autocracies with democratic features as temporary, fragile institutional constellations, Brumberg (2002, 56) argues that

> it is now clear, both within and far beyond the Middle East, that liberalized autocracy has proven far more durable than once imagined. The trademark mixture of guided pluralism, controlled elections, and selective repression in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Algeria, and Kuwait is not just a 'survival strategy' adopted by authoritarian regimes, but rather a type of political system whose institutions, rules and logic defy any linear model of democratization.

The arguments for the existence of elections in dictatorships are functionalist, premised on the assumption that leaders in autocracies utilize institutions to prolong their stay in office. These explanations can be roughly grouped under three headings: co-optation, deterrence, and information.

First, and most prominently, a number of scholars have argued that electoral institutions are used to co-opt potential regime rivals by providing them with incentives to support the regime (Cox 2009; Gandhi 2008; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Geddes 2006, 2009; Magaloni and Kricheli 2010; Magaloni 2008a, 2010; Reuter and Gandhi 2011; Svolik 2012, 2013; Wright 2011). These incentives involve greater influence, possibilities for promotions, and a share of the spoils of government. Such co-optation can either be targeted at the opposition and the public who can threaten with a revolt (e.g., Gandhi and Przeworski 2007) or at internal elites who constitute a coup threat (e.g., Boix and Svolik 2013).

Second, elections have been argued to serve as a means of deterring the opposition by projecting strength. On this account, elections are a way for incumbents to send costly signals of their own mobilization capacity and support to potential rivals, whether these rivals are a part of the existing regime or not. By winning a convincingly high proportion of the votes, incumbents enforce the belief that they have popular support and that overthrows are likely to be opposed by the masses. Furthermore, by mobilizing the electoral machinery of supporters and man power nationwide, the regime displays its ability to mobilize and organize if an armed confrontation were to take place (Magaloni 2008b).

An instructive case of both co-optation and deterrence is the role of elections during the Partido Revolucionario Institucional's (PRI) seventy-year rule in Mexico,

thoroughly studied by Magaloni (2008b). The PRI's rule was characterized by extensive spending in electoral campaigns to promote the party's many presidential candidates. More importantly, winning the elections by a large margin allowed the PRI to project an image of invincibility and future durability. Potential rivals were thus compelled to join the regime party rather than attempting to come to power using a different party vehicle. Participation in the party organization promised enrichment and the possibility of power. Leadership rotation was institutionalized in Mexico, and the most popular and promising party members could climb the party ladder in an attempt to become president.

Related to the deterrence argument presented earlier, elections have been argued to provide the incumbent with information about both regime and opposition support (e.g., Cox 2009; Cheibub, Hays, and Savun 2012; Pop-Eleches and Robertson 2011). This means that incumbents can use this information to co-opt or silence popular rivals, or concede to popular demands. Conversely, it also means that the opposition can better know when regime support is (relatively) weak. This ties into recent general theoretical arguments making the case that the electoral mechanism is a device for sending and receiving information about who would win a potential violent conflict (Fearon 2011; Little 2012).

A Theory of Postelectoral Coups

In the following, we present a theoretical argument relating elections under authoritarianism to coup attempts. Our argument is compatible with recent literature on how elections yield information about the mobilization capacity of the political opposition (e.g., Little 2012; Fearon 2011), and very recent work on how coups can be a response to public signals about opposition strength (Casper and Tyson 2014). Our study is a concrete application of these arguments to the case of the postelectoral coup (see also Pop-Eleches and Robertson 2011; Cheibub, Hays and Savun 2012). A premise here is the claim that one of the reasons why autocrats hold elections is to get information on the regime–opposition balance of power. Crucially, we argue that signals of opposition strength emanating from elections, either in the form of a loss of electoral support for the incumbent or postelection demonstrations by an invigorated opposition, can trigger coup attempts. Coups in the aftermath of elections are organized by regime elites primarily to prevent a popular uprising that plausibly threatens their influence and privileges. Subsequently, we first argue that the motivation of regime elites for staging a coup attempt is the preservation of privilege. This motivation encompasses securing similar or improved privileges under a future government. Second, we relate the motivation for attempting to overthrow the incumbent to the role of elections, and present two mechanisms by which postelectoral coups can help preserve the privileges of coup makers: On one hand, removing the incumbent can function as a concession to the political opposition, and potentially even facilitate a transition to a new regime headed by the opposition. On the other hand, a coup can pave way for increased repression.

Coups and the Preservation of Privilege

As mentioned previously, institutions in autocracies have both been argued to arise from the dictator's need to fend off the political opposition (e.g., Gandhi and Przeworski 2007) and to keep elites within the regime at bay (e.g., Boix and Svolik 2013). Svolik (2012, 3-10) refers to the former as the problem of "authoritarian control" and to the latter as the problem of "authoritarian power sharing." We incorporate both these dimensions by understanding elite dynamics in autocracies as an interaction where the key players are the political opposition, the dictator, and the civilian and military elite on which the dictator's power ultimately rests, hereby referred to as the regime elite. We conceive of the regime elite as encapsulating both civilian and military actors that hold key positions in the state. Regime elites are not restricted to the ruling clique that is closest to the dictator, but include civilian elites cooperating with the regime (e.g., judges and ruling party members) as well as high-ranking military officers. These actors are regime elites in the sense that they are granted privileges, rents, and positions of power in the regime in exchange for tacit or manifest support.

What are the primary paths to losing power for autocratic regime elites and dictators? Regime elites can either be removed by a mobilized and consolidated mass uprising, or by the dictator through purges and assassinations. The dictator, on the other hand, can be removed by the regime elites through a coup or by a revolution resulting from popular anti-regime mobilization. In other words, both the regime elites and the dictator can be ousted by a powerful opposition movement, and therefore benefit from its marginalization. At the same time, both regime elites and the dictator can attempt to revoke the privileges of the other. However, the risk of such actions backfiring is considerable. If members of the regime elite attempt a coup for example, they run the risk of being opposed by other factions of the elite, and that the dictator successfully averts the attempted overthrow. In this case, the coup plotters would suffer severe consequences. Similarly, power grabs by the dictator are risky endeavors, because they can cause factions within the regime to plot against the incumbent. Coup attempts and large-scale purges of regime elites are consequently rare events.

In line with prominent general theories of elite motivations in dictatorships (e.g., Svolik 2012; Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003), we assume that the dictator wants to stay in power, while regime elites primarily want to sustain the privileged position that allows them to peddle influence and extract rents, and, if possible, improve their future power position in the regime. The latter entails that regime elites are not always unified in their goals. Some factions of the elite might seek to improve their lot, while others are satisfied with the status quo.

Since coups are risky, regime elites will rarely attempt coups unless they have very strong motivations to do so. A salient situation in which motivations for a coup will emerge is when a faction of the regime elite sees their privileged position threatened. Depending on the perceived stability of the regime, preserving their privileged

positions in society can be achieved by either (1) supporting the current dictator or (2) supporting a new incumbent. If the regime is stable and the external threat is low, then supporting the current dictator is the most beneficial strategy. However, if the status quo is severely threatened, changing allegiances to either a different faction within the regime or to a new regime spearheaded by the opposition may be a better way to ensure privilege in the long term. In the latter case, the motivations of regime elites may even facilitate regime change. That coups can be motivated by self-preservation is consistent with extant literature on coups in autocracies. For example, when dictators attempt power grabs to better their position vis-à-vis the regime elite, they are more prone to coup attempts because such power grabs leave regime elites facing an uncertain future (Svolik 2012). In other words, the potential threat of losing power and influence can unify a faction of the regime elite in a putsch to remove the dictator.

In this framework, factions within the regime elite will attempt coups whenever they can serve to maintain or better their position in society, either by containing a revolution or avoiding that the dictator's power increases disproportionately. When threats to their privileged positions mount, regime elites are more likely to unify in their aims, opt to remove the dictator, and support a new incumbent from within the regime or from the opposition. Our argument thus entails that whenever the cost of removing the dictator is lower than the probability of regime elites losing power— either in a revolutionary uprising or through power concentration—the optimal strategy for regime elites is to attempt to remove the dictator through a coup. In the following sections, we describe how elections can yield information on this cost–benefit balance, and how coups can be instigated to contain popular revolutions.

The Role of Elections

We begin by acknowledging that elections serve many functions in autocracies, the most crucial of which are described in the literature reviewed previously. That many of these functions generally serve to stabilize autocracies that would otherwise have a high risk of coups (e.g., Gandhi and Przeworski 2006, 2007) is not disputed here. Rather, we argue that one of the roles attributed to elections, namely, that of being a *vehicle of information*, can have destabilizing consequences.

Our argument thus considers the role of *information* in the three-way relationship between the dictator, the regime elite, and the opposition. We assume that the dictator's and the regime elites' information about the mobilization capacity of the opposition is imperfect. One of the main problems for the regime thus becomes getting information about the probability of a popular revolt. As Kuran (1995) has written extensively on, preference falsification—that is, the fact that citizens in autocracies have an incentive to publicly conceal their sentiments toward the regime—makes it almost impossible to assess the distribution of anti-regime preferences in the population, and when a social cascade might lead the masses to turn against the regime. As recent events in the Arab Spring have shown, a seemingly

inconsequential incident like a vegetable salesman setting himself on fire in Tunisia can set in motion a wave of protests that go on to engulf an entire region. In this perspective, it is in uncovering information about popular support for the regime and about the mobilization capacity of the opposition that elections play a crucial informational role.

Although support for the opposition can be very hard to gauge, information about it can be derived on a regular basis if a sufficient degree of press freedom, freedom of assembly, and political organization is allowed. In those instances, the regime can stay informed through the media, and through observing the opposition in the field. An alternative way to gauge support for the regime is through elections. Elections in autocracies, however flawed, will often yield information about the relative standing of the regime in the population, and on the balance of power between the regime and the opposition (for related work that makes this argument, see Pop-Eleches and Robertson 2011; Cheibub, Hays, and Savun 2012). Information is revealed through elections in two ways: (1) the incumbent candidate can either suffer an unexpectedly large backlash in the election—which can happen even when elections have been rigged—or (2) the election outcome can trigger popular protests by an opposition that feels strengthened enough to engage in mass protests. We thus assume that the performance of the ruling party, and/or the popular reaction to the election under some circumstances can serve as a *vehicle for information about the strength of the opposition* in the population, and that this sends a signal to regime elites about the relative cost of letting the current ruler stay in power. If the information revealed indicates that the probability of being ousted from power in a popular uprising is high, regime elites are likely to attempt a coup in a bid to preserve their current privileges and improve their position in the postcoup regime. Put differently, in the face of a strengthened opposition, indicating an increased likelihood of a successful popular revolt, we contend that removing the dictator through a coup can help avoid a revolution and secure the privileges of regime elites in a future regime.

There are two main mechanisms by which a coup can effectively contain a potential mass uprising; it can either be undertaken as an act of *support to the opposition* or to enable an *increase in repression*. We describe both of them here, but do not speculate as to scope conditions that trigger the one or the other.

In the first mechanism, removing the dictator can be a powerful concession to the opposition, reducing the popular grievances that are fueling the uprising. After removing the dictator, the coup makers can install either someone affiliated with the regime in power or someone representing the popular opposition that the coup makers find acceptable. In the latter case, this is a clear win for the opposition. The coup makers will have to be "on the winning side" of an opposition that is gaining strength, increasing the probability that they will remain in favor of a future regime led by the opposition. In this way, it instantiates a combination of the two motivations we claim are behind postelection coups: it will both contain a revolution and improve the position of the coup makers at the same time. Even if the coup makers do not install a member of the opposition in power but choose a person affiliated

with the old incumbent as the executive, the coup that removed the unpopular dictator can be still seen as an important concession, restoring a measure of popular legitimacy to the regime. The scenes of mass jubilation when the Egyptian military ousted Hosni Mubarak in 2011, and the very similar scenes that followed when the military removed his successor, President Mursi, are indeed testimony to how popular a coup can be.

In addition to being a *direct* concession to the popular uprising, ousting the dictator can be seen as a *costly signal* by the regime elites of their intent to make future concessions in the face of popular opposition. Removing a dictator is a costly signal for many reasons. The coup attempt itself is potentially extremely costly for the group involved since it comes with a high risk of failure and fatal consequences. It also endangers the revenue stream of the regime if international investors and foreign governments remove their support in the wake of a coup. There are also very high transaction costs of installing a new leader, since such a transition comes with a high probability of internal infighting and uncertainty. In sum, since coups are high-risk endeavors, staging a coup in the face of an invigorated popular opposition sends a strong signal of the regime's intent to respect the demands of the opposition in the future.

There are a number of examples of coups where an unpopular leader is removed in order for the regime to regain legitimacy in the population or to help the opposition into power. Consider the case of the 1978 coup in Bolivia, where General Pereda unseated incumbent president Banzer. Since the constitution did not allow the sitting president to compete in the election, the regime fielded General Pereda as Banzer's successor. The official vote count showed that Pereda won the election. However, the leftist opposition had shown itself to have overwhelming popular support, and the election was followed by allegations of electoral fraud. After massive electoral protests had swept the country, General Pereda removed Banzer from power, installed himself as president, and blamed the former administration for the electoral fraud.

Another example comes from Thailand after the election in 1959. Sitting prime minister Pibunsongkhram had blatantly rigged the election in a bid to stay in power, after an election where the opposition gained on the incumbent. The results triggered massive popular protests as well as public statements of discontent from the king of Thailand. The events led the military, spearheaded by Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat to intervene, claiming to heed the demands of the people and the king to oust the discredited government.

In addition to serving as a concession to the opposition, we propose a mechanism that is radically different from the first. Here, the coup is not a hand to the opposition, but a means for its destruction. On this view, a coup can serve as a vehicle through which the military can assert total control over the regime, allowing them to increase the level of repression to the point where a revolution will be contained. This can happen if the dictator and factions within the military disagree about the proper mix of repression and concessions to apply in light of the increased

mobilization capacity of the opposition. The dictator may be unwilling to give the military the resources and free reins required to repress the opposition, since giving them such powers can strengthen the military's position to the point where it can completely dominate the dictator (for a discussion of this, see Svolik 2012). In such a situation, the dictator can propose concessions to the opposition instead, which can directly or indirectly hurt regime elites. He or she can raise taxes on the rich, reshuffle his or her cabinet, or sack members of the regime elites from crucial positions, sacrificing them for increased popular support. Concessions to the opposition can thus be a zero-sum game between regime elites and the dictator. In those cases, regime elites might have to choose between loosing influence or resources, and removing the dictator.

An example of a postelectoral coup where the overthrow facilitated repression is Algeria in 1992. The putsch came after the Islamic Salvation Front (ISF) showed impressive strength in the first round of the general election in December 1991. The military then canceled the second round of the election and ousted President Chadli Bendjedid, who had been the driving force behind liberalizing reforms. The military regime proceeded to ban the ISF and launched a massive campaign of repression against its members and sympathizers.

In summary, when regime elites face a heightened threat of a successful popular uprising signaled by an election in which the opposition displays strength, and this threat is great enough to outweigh the risks associated with moving against the dictator, parts of the regime elite are likely to instigate coups. The coup can subsequently avoid a full-scale revolution, either by serving as a concession to the opposition or by facilitating an increase in repression.

There are two obvious caveats to our argument. First, one can argue that the informational role ascribed to elections in our theory is nonsensical, since widespread electoral fraud and repression makes elections in autocracies largely uninformative about the regime–opposition balance of power. We disagree with this proposition for the following reason. Electoral fraud is often a large-scale enterprise, conducted by a variety of disorganized regime sympathizers with various tools from the ''menu of manipulation'' (Schedler 2002), occurring in diverse localities spread across the country. As such, it is often impossible to know precisely how much fraud was applied, and only that there was *enough* fraud. This would explain why the opposition in some circumstances wins even if fraud is widespread (Hyde and Marinov 2011). This means that the capacity of the regime to manipulate the election is itself a signal of regime strength. If the regime manages to completely overwhelm the opposition, and prevent opposition electoral gains through fraud, no matter how the fraud was conducted, it will signal that the regime is strong. If the opposition gains even if fraud was applied, this signals that the opposition is strengthened. An important additional point is that the argument of elections as information devices presupposes that the regime has an incentive to maintain the informational role of elections, because elections are also selected to send signals to the opposition about the strength and mobilization capacity of the incumbent. A type of electoral fraud that

would make the election result completely uninformative would render the election useless as a vehicle of information.

A second question is raised by the fact that the information yielded by the election goes to both the dictator and the regime elite. In our model, this information leads to the regime elite removing the dictator to contain a revolution. An immediate question that arises in this context is why the dictator and the regime elites respond differently to this information. Why does the regime elite remove the dictator rather than letting the dictator respond to the same information and cooperate with him to choose some mix of concessions or repression? It is our contention that the dictator will often disagree with the regime elite about the proper mix of concessions and repression, leading to a coup attempt following one of our two proposed mechanisms. The disagreement might stem from the dictator's reluctance to increase repression due to the potential threat the military can pose with more resources. The dictator might thus prefer concessions rather than repression, at odds with the preferences of regime elites. In this situation, the coup plotters are hardliners willing and able to launch a repressive crackdown on the opposition. Conversely, the dictator may favor repression, but regime elites and the military may be reluctant to carry out orders of widespread violence because of the size of the opposition movement. In these situations, removing the dictator is a concession to the opposition, aimed at reducing the popular grievances that are fueling the uprising.

The argument presented here implies that elections that reveal that the incumbent is significantly weakened are more likely to lead to regime elites deciding that it is less costly to remove the dictator than to risk a popular uprising. Since we are primarily concerned with the popularity of the dictator, and since the dictator is almost always the executive, we focus on elections that pertain to the executive branch. This yields the following hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 1:** Coup attempts are more likely after executive elections in autocracies where support for the incumbent drops significantly.

This hypothesis is perhaps the clearest implication of our argument. However, opposition strength is not only revealed in the election result but can also be gauged by the opposition's reaction to the election. An opposition that reacts with widespread protests shows a high level of confidence and mobilization capacity and indicates that the proportion of the votes for the opposition might be larger than what is reflected in the actual (fraudulent) election result. This yields

> **Hypothesis 2:** Coup attempts are more likely after executive elections in autocracies where the outcome is protested.

An additional hypothesis follows from our framework. Since elections reveal information about the power of the opposition, we propose that our mechanism should be particularly strong in circumstances when the election yields *more added informational content*. We here follow the argument in Pop-Eleches and Robertson

(2011) and claim that the effect of an opposition displaying strength will be stronger in an information environment where the information revealed in the election is more *surprising*. In regimes with a free press, and relatively fair elections, the *quality* of the information revealed in the election will perhaps be higher, but the information content of the election will be lower since the information revealed in the election is already known to the regime. In states with free press, and where the opposition is allowed to mobilize on a more regular basis, the regime will already know that the opposition is strengthened when the election takes place, and the election is less important in informational terms. In regimes where there are severe limits on participation and press freedom, the election will be about the only time when information about the strength of the opposition will be revealed, and these elections will be of greater value as vehicles of information. This yields the following additional hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 3:** The effects of electoral protest or a drop in support for the incumbent will have a stronger effect on coup attempts in more harshly authoritarian states.

Research Design

Our original data are in event format, containing one observation on January 1 every year, as well as dated coup attempts. We restrict our units of analysis in three steps: first, we delimit our sample of autocracies by dichotomizing the Polity score (Marshall, Gurr, and Jaggers 2010), classifying all country observations $Polity \leq 5$ as autocracies (for a thorough discussion, see Bogaards 2011, 7). Second, since we are interested in the aftermath of elections, we consider only observations ≤365 days after elections. This creates our unit of analysis which is the postelection period (365 days) in a given country. Finally, to make sure that our regression results are not inflated by repeated coup attempts in the aftermath of elections, we aggregate the dated coup attempts into a dichotomous variable indicating whether there was a coup attempt in the postelection year or not. Furthermore, the aggregation eliminates the possibility that our results are driven by countercoups, instances of attempted overthrows aimed at coup makers that have already come to power by staging a coup in the aftermath of the election. After processing the data in these three steps, we obtain a data set consisting of 958 postelection-year observations with fifty-seven coup attempts of which twenty-seven are successful. However, since this last step removes quite a large number of coup attempts (reduced from seventy-eight to fifty-seven), we present descriptive statistics on postelection coups including the dated events.

Dependent Variable: Coup Attempts

We utilize Powell and Thyne's data for coup attempts, which emerges from a discussion of various aspects of coups that analysts have previously utilized to identify the

phenomenon.[1] Five criteria must be satisfied in order for an event to be classified as a coup attempt. First, the target must be the executive. Second, in order to expand from the narrow notion of military coups, the perpetrators may be *both military and civilian* elites that are part of the state apparatus. This distinguishes coups from civil wars, changes brought about by popular movements or foreign interventions. Third, the activity must be illegal and there need not be any casualties. We agree with Powell and Thyne (2011, 251) that "the illegal distinction is important because it differentiates coups from political pressure, which is common whenever people have freedom to organize. For example, when massive protests in Thailand prompted General Anupong to 'bluntly advise' Thai Prime Minister Somchai to step down in 2008, this is not considered a coup." Fourth, the attempted overthrow must be both overt and actual. These aspects are closely related to failed coups, as the identification of failed attempts to seize power is not always clear-cut. One is often left with plot rumors possibly leaked by the ruling clique or the opposition in order to achieve a political goal. Therefore, coup attempts must be overt, meaning that there was a visible movement to claim power, and actual in the sense that the event is not claimed ex post (e.g., in order to persecute someone). Fifth, a coup attempt can be either successful or unsuccessful. According to Powell and Thyne's coding, the perpetrators must hold power for seven days or more to qualify as a successful coup.

To summarize, our dependent variable is *coup attempt*, encompassing all attempts at overthrowing the executive, whether successful or not.

Independent Variables

Data on elections are taken from the National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) data set (Hyde and Marinov 2011), which includes information on all national legislative and executive election events in the period 1945 to 2010. We utilize the data to create two independent variables of interest. Both variables are dichotomous and can take the value 1 only in post-executive election years. By post-executive elections, we refer to all elections in which executive office was contested (coding based on NELDA question 20: "Was the office of the incumbent leader contested in this election?").

Executive: Opposition gain. This variable is used to investigate Hypothesis 1. It takes the value 1 if the opposition gained votes relative to the prior election, including observations in which the opposition won the election. It takes the value 0 if the opposition did not gain votes relative to the prior election or if the election did not concern the executive (e.g., exclusive legislative body elections). The coding is based on NELDA question 27: "Was the vote count a gain for the opposition?"

Executive: Postelection riots and protests. To investigate Hypothesis 2, we include a variable taking the value 1 if riots and protests occurred after an executive election. The variable takes the value 0 if riots and protests did not occur after the election.

The coding is based on NELDA question 29: "Were there riots and protests after the election?"

Control Variables

We control for several factors that have been shown to be associated with coup attempts and that can act as confounding variables in our setup. Since the crude autocracy classification includes a lot of heterogeneous regimes, and since we are interested in the effect of *election events* on coup risk, and not the effect of the regime's more stable characteristics, we include variables that capture regime characteristics within our sample of autocracies. We take these steps to ensure that the relationship between elections revealing information about the relative strength of the regime vis-à-vis the opposition and postelectoral coup attempts is not spurious to regime fragility. In other words, if a coup would happen even if the election had not revealed the strength of the opposition, our argument would be falsified.

First, we include gross domestic product (GDP) per capita $(\ln)_{t-1}$ and GDP growth $(percent)_{t-1}$ in order to take economic factors into account. Although it is unlikely that level of economic development in autocracies is consistent with modernization—because many rich autocracies are dependent upon vast amounts of natural resources, and wealth has a tendency to concentrate in the hand of the regime elite—richer regimes should be less prone to coup attempts because they have more funds available for coup-proofing strategies and bribes (e.g., Ross 2001). Additionally, the relationship between economic growth and autocratic stability has been demonstrated as one of the most robust in the literature (Przeworski et al. 2000; Hegre, Knutsen, and Rød 2012). An autocracy that is going through an economic crisis is expected to be more prone to coup attempts since mobilizing support for a coup during a recession is easier.

Second, Age of regime (ln) as coded by Marshall, Gurr, and Jaggers (2010) is included in the models. Consolidation of the regime leads to the entrenchment of the regime through the removal of opponents, societal penetration, and legitimization through tradition. Thus, the longer the regime has been in power, the less coup prone we expect it to be.

Third, considering that coup makers may enjoy less legitimacy than autocrats coming to power through semi-legitimate means (Collier and Hoeffler 2005), and thus be more prone to both electoral weakness and subsequent coup attempts, Proximity of coup attempt is included. It is a continuous variable defined as $x =$ days since last coup attempt$/\alpha$, where α is some chosen divisor. The values of this variable range between 0 and 1, and the closer to 0 the value, the more proximate the coup attempt.

Finally, in some instances, a regime may hold elections to accommodate massive social pressures. In these cases, the elections themselves might not be instrumental in bringing about the coup; rather, they might simply be a reflection of the popular pressures facing the regime. A regime might introduce elections to placate the

Table 1. The Timing of Postelection Coup Attempts.

	Coup attempt		
	Unsuccessful	Successful	Total
Within thirty days	5	7	12
Within three months	6	4	10
Within six months	11	12	23
Within twelve months	23	10	33
Total	45	33	78

opposition. In such cases, the election is brought about by a strengthened opposition and is itself a signal of opposition strength. To investigate this possibility, we include *First multiparty*, a dummy variable indicating whether the election in question was the first election in which multiple parties could participate, and thus where elections were recently introduced.

Empirical Analysis

In this section, we present both descriptive statistics and regression analyses that support the argument made earlier, namely, that elections in which the opposition displays strength trigger coup attempts.

Postelection Coups: Trends and Empirical Evidence

Table 1 reviews our data of postelection coups in autocracies, showing that 22 percent (78 of the 356) of coup attempts in our period of analysis happened within a year of national elections. Twelve of them were staged immediately, attempting to overthrow the incumbent within a month of the elections. Over half (45) were executed in the period from one to six months, while 42 percent (33) were executed between six and twelve months after elections. Moreover, the data reveal an interesting pattern regarding the proportion of unsuccessful and successful coups. While the distribution is even in the first six months after elections, 70 percent of the more belated postelections coup attempts fail. A plausible suggestion is that these coups are initiated by coalitions that have taken a longer time to mobilize (after the election) and that might be weaker relative to the dictator than coup plotters who are confident enough to move instantly after the election. Another intervening factor here is that the legitimacy of extra-constitutional seizure of power after elections is time contingent. The legitimacy inherited from election events—either in the form of electoral setbacks or popular protests—may be as fickle as the fire that caused it in the first place.

Table 2 provides preliminary evidence for Hypotheses 1 and 2, namely, that autocratic incumbents are more likely to be subjected to coup attempts when the

Table 2. Main Independent Variables by Coup Attempt in the Aftermath of Elections in Autocracies (Percent).

	Coup attempt = 0	Coup attempt = 1
Between and before elections	93.3	6.7
Executive: Opposition gain = 0	94.1	5.9
Executive: Opposition gain = 1	76.5	23.5
Executive: Protests and riots = 0	94.1	5.9
Executive: Protests and riots = 1	77.2	22.8

opposition displays strength in executive elections. The first row of Table 2 reports the percentages of autocratic observations between and before elections in which a coup was attempted, while rows 2 through 5 display the percentages of postelection observations in which incumbent overthrows were attempted, tabulated by the main independent variables. In autocratic country years not following elections (between or before elections), coups were attempted in 6.7 percent of the observations. The coup rate shifts downward slightly to 5.9 percent of postelection observations in which the opposition did not gain votes, or did not spark widespread protests. In other words, Table 2 shows that postelection observations in which no threat is posed from the political opposition has a lower coup rate than observations between and before elections. When the opposition displays strength in executive elections, on the other hand, the percentages increase dramatically, ranging from 22.8 to 23.5 percent. Put differently, coup attempts are much more likely to follow the aftermath of executive elections revealing that the opposition is gaining ground.

Estimation

In the following, we present results of random intercept logistic regression analyses. Employing random intercept models allows us to model country-specific omitted variables, handling the fact that some countries are more coup-prone than others due to unobserved factors. Models 1 through 3 in Table 3 display the results of the main analyses using the Polity IV dichotomization of autocracy. In Table 4, we estimate the same models using the Alvarez, Cheibub, Limongi and Przeworski (ACLP) operationalization (Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland 2010) of autocracy (models 4–6), and on a sample including only post-executive election observations (models 7–9). All estimates are displayed as coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Finally, in Figure 1, we evaluate the information mechanism more directly.

In model 1, in Table 3, our indicator of a weakened autocratic incumbent *Executive: Opposition gained votes*, shows that the electoral performance of the dictator affects the probability of a coup attempt. Similarly, model 2 shows that the impact of *Executive: Postelection riots and protests* on coup attempts also is significant and positive. In other words, when opposition supporters display strength by gaining

Table 3. Estimated Coefficients of Coup Attempts, Polity IV Operationalization.

	Coup attempt		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Executive: Opposition gained votes	1.278**		1.082*
	(0.436)		(0.444)
Executive: Postelection riots and protests		1.608***	1.480***
		(0.399)	(0.402)
Lagged GDP per capita (ln)	−0.132	−0.112	−0.140
	(0.240)	(0.245)	(0.244)
Lagged GDP growth (percent)	−0.022	−0.027	−0.025
	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.018)
Age of regime (ln)	0.002	−0.017	0.003
	(0.077)	(0.076)	(0.077)
Proximity of coup attempt	−1.088**	−0.982*	−0.964*
	(0.422)	(0.426)	(0.428)
First multiparty	0.348	0.277	0.155
	(0.659)	(0.668)	(0.671)
Constant	−1.835	−2.088	−1.978
	(1.714)	(1.757)	(1.739)
Δ AUC	0.017	0.039	0.033
Observations	958	958	958
No. of countries	117	117	117
σ_α	0.985	1.030	0.975

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. GDP = gross domestic product; AUC = area under the curve.
$^\dagger p < .10$, $*p < .05$, $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$.

votes relative to the last election or by taking to the streets to protest the outcome of elections, attempted incumbent overthrows are more likely. To investigate the substantive effects of our variables of interest, we simulated probabilities of a coup attempt in models 1 and 2 using CLARIFY (King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000). The simulated values are plotted with 90 percent confidence intervals in Figure 2. The plot shows that the simulated probability of a coup attempt when the opposition gains votes relative to the last elections is between 8.6 and 23.1 percent, whereas it varies between 3 and 5.8 percent if the opposition does not gain votes (model 1 in Table 3). We see a similar picture when the opposition organizes protests and riots, with the simulated probabilities varying between 10.6 and 24 percent (model 2 in Table 3). The results in models 1 and 2 and the simulated effects indicate strong support for the theoretical model elaborated on earlier, and illustrate that the effects are substantial. Finally, in model 3, we include both indicators in the same model. The estimates are slightly more conservative, but still significant and in the expected direction. More important, the results in model 3 indicate that the two variables are identifying two different ways in which the opposition can threaten autocratic regimes in the aftermath of elections.

Table 4. Estimated Coefficients of Coup Attempts, ACLP Operationalization (models 4–6), and Post-executive Election Observations Only (models 7–9).

	Coup attempt					
	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Executive: Opposition gained votes	1.755**		1.601**	1.305**		1.251**
	(0.559)		(0.550)	(0.456)		(0.463)
Executive: Postelection riots and protests		1.312**	1.214**		1.592***	1.550***
		(0.458)	(0.470)		(0.427)	(0.429)
Lagged GDP per capita (ln)	−0.401	−0.306	−0.394	0.116	0.205	0.094
	(0.281)	(0.266)	(0.278)	(0.276)	(0.288)	(0.289)
Lagged GDP growth (percent)	−0.016	−0.021	−0.017	−0.029	−0.034†	−0.032†
	(0.020)	(0.019)	(0.020)	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.019)
Age of regime (ln)	−0.076	−0.124	−0.072	0.096	0.048	0.090
	(0.083)	(0.077)	(0.082)	(0.102)	(0.099)	(0.102)
Proximity of coup attempt	−0.650	−0.623	−0.580	−1.558**	−1.359*	−1.349*
	(0.449)	(0.430)	(0.447)	(0.560)	(0.574)	(0.576)
First multiparty	0.708	1.009†	0.618	0.285	0.358	0.226
	(0.637)	(0.590)	(0.627)	(0.679)	(0.682)	(0.694)
Constant	−0.200	−0.730	−0.355	−3.286	−4.157†	−3.592†
	(1.990)	(1.905)	(1.971)	(2.030)	(2.144)	(2.125)
Observations	847	847	847	387	387	387
No. of countries	113	113	113	87	87	87
σ_{α}	1.264	1.122	1.198	0.553	0.685	0.543

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. GDP = gross domestic product.
$^{\dagger}p < .10$, $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.

The inclusion of our variables showing a strengthened opposition also yields added predictive power. For each of the models displayed in Table 3, we show the change (Δ) in area under the curve (AUC) of the estimation after we include the independent variable of interest (see Ward, Greenhill, and Bakke 2010). The numbers show that the in-sample predictive accuracy of all models increases when including *Executive: Opposition gained votes* and *Executive: Postelection riots and protests*, but that the increase is higher when the opposition manages to mobilize protests (ΔAUC = 0.039) than when the opposition gained votes (ΔAUC = 0.017).

Turning to the control variables, the results are inconclusive regarding level of income, economic growth, regime duration, and first multiparty election. However, the probability of being subjected to a coup attempt declines with the time distance to the last coup attempt. The estimates for proximity of coup attempt thus support the notion that there exists a "coup trap" (Londregan and Poole 1990).

The results of the robustness tests are remarkably similar for both the models estimated on a sample of autocracies using the ACLP measure (models 4–6 in Table 4) and when excluding observations with no consequence for the executive office (models 7–9 in Table 4).
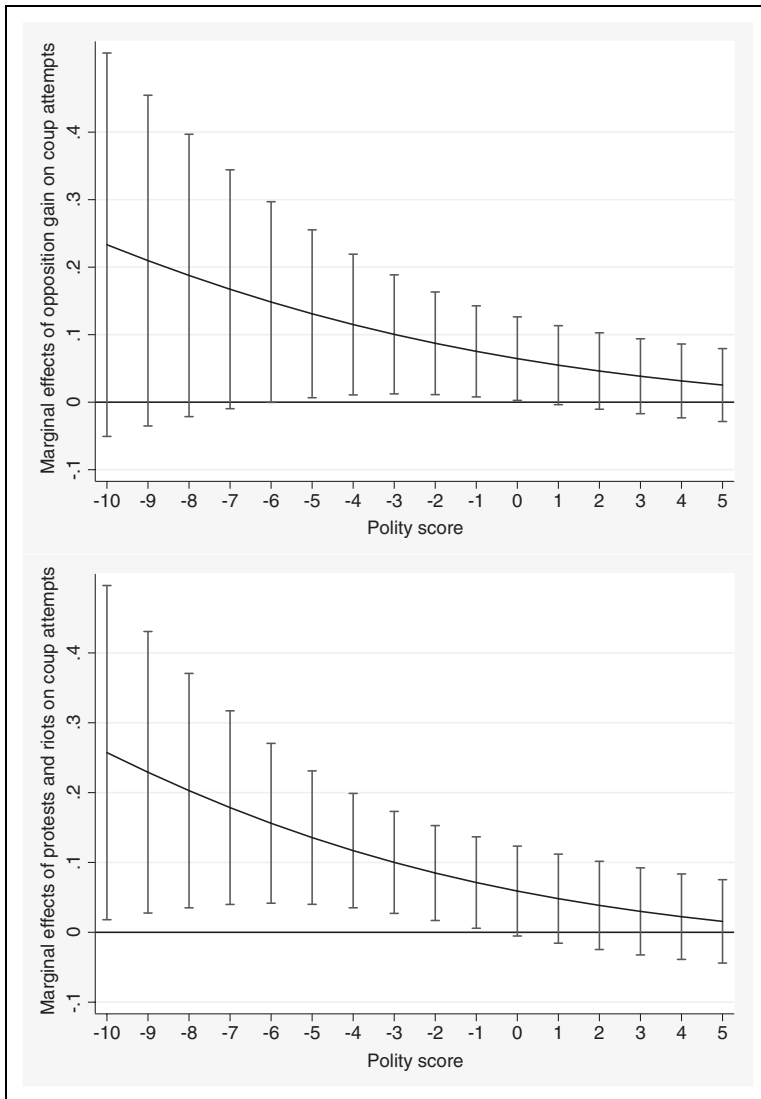
Figure 1. Testing the information mechanism—marginal effects of *Executive: Opposition gained votes* (top) and *Executive: Postelection protests and riots* (bottom) on probability of a coup attempt (*y*-axis) for various levels on the Polity IV score (*x*-axis; 90 percent confidence intervals).

However, although the results presented above favor our argument (Hypotheses 1 and 2), there is one prominent alternative explanation that fit with our results that we need to investigate. It could be argued that the results are driven by coups in which
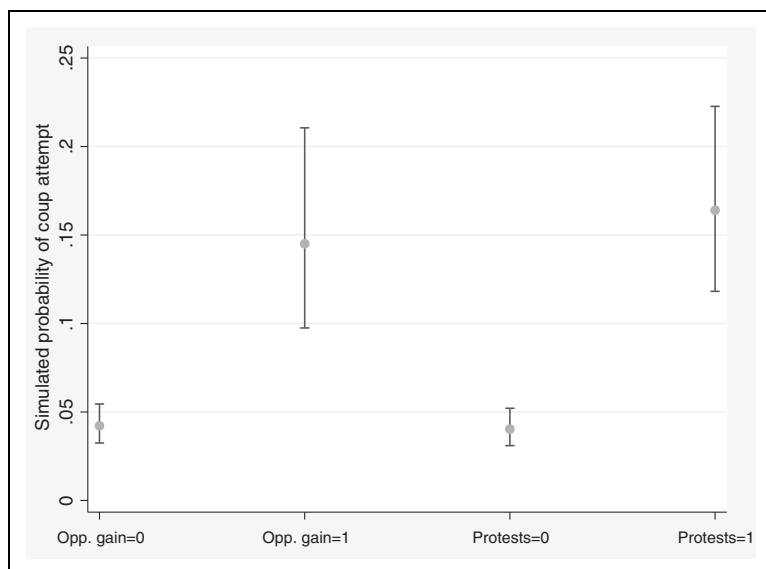
Figure 2. Simulated probabilities of coup attempt for *Executive: Opposition gained votes* in model 1 and *Executive: Postelection protests and riots* in model 2 (90 percent confidence intervals).

coup makers attempt to reinstate an incumbent that lost the election. In order to test whether our results are driven by that logic, we removed all cases where the incumbent steps down due to the election results and reran the analyses. The results are highly robust to this alteration (results presented in the Online Appendix).

Finally, we propose a more direct test of the information mechanism (Hypothesis 3). If elections trigger coup attempts by revealing *previously unknown information* about the incumbent–opposition balance, then the effect of the opposition displaying strength on the probability of incumbent overthrows should be conditional on the information environment. For example, in authoritarian regimes where some information about the popularity of the opposition and the regime is conveyed in the national press, displays of strength by the opposition in elections should be less "surprising" to the regime elite, and thus less likely to trigger coups. In more closed media environments, on the other hand, gauging popular sentiment is not feasible, and elections should be more informative. In order to test whether the information environment impacts the effect of the opposition displaying strength, we interacted our independent variables of interest with the Polity IV score.[2]

Figure 1 plots the marginal effects of *Executive: Opposition gained votes* (top) and *Executive: Postelection protests and riots* (bottom) on probability of a coup attempt (*y*-axis) for various levels on the Polity IV score (*x*-axis).[3] Although uncertainty is considerable in the most harshly authoritarian regimes, both the top and the

bottom plot display that if the opposition displays strength in more informative elections, the predicted probability of a coup attempt starkly increases compared to if the election favors the incumbent. The effect is not as dramatic in less informative elections. In fact, the estimated difference in probability of a coup attempt steadily decreases the more open the regime is (e.g., the less informative the elections are about the incumbent–opposition balance). In the top plot, the estimated average difference in probability of being subjected to a coup attempt depending on whether the opposition gained votes is between 14 and 23 percent in closed autocracies (Polity IV ≤ -6), while it is between 2 and 6 percent in more open regimes (Polity IV ≥ 0). In the bottom plot, the estimated average probabilities are between 15 and 25 percent (Polity IV ≤ -6) and 2 and 6 percent (Polity IV ≥ 0). This is a strong result in favor of our proposed mechanism, since few other explanations would predict this particular interaction.[4]

In sum, we find support for our hypotheses, namely, that coup attempts are more likely in autocracies holding executive elections where the opposition displays strength.[5] In addition, the results show that elections in restricted information environments, where the election might be one of the very few sources of information on opposition support, have a bigger impact on the probability of an attempted overthrow. The findings reveal that the assertions about the stabilizing effect of elections require some nuancing. In fact, when the opposition demonstrates strength, elections in autocracies can trigger coup attempts rather than increase longevity.

Conclusion

In this article, we have demonstrated that the arguments for the stabilizing effects of elections in autocracies need to be significantly nuanced. Contrary to much of the contemporary literature on elections in autocracies (Boix and Svolik 2013; Gandhi and Przeworski 2006, 2007; Gandhi 2008), we argue that elections have the potential to be a force for instability and change rather than a tool of stabilization. More specifically, when incumbents show electoral weakness, executive elections have the potential to prompt coup attempts from the regime elite, whose privileged positions in society are threatened by being "on the wrong side" in times of political upheaval. Our argument is that electoral outcomes—both in the form of voting shares and in the form of opposition reactions to the elections—are signals containing information about the strength of the opposition, and indirectly about the likelihood of a successful popular revolt. When the opposition displays strength, coups can contain popular mobilization either by serving as concessions to the opposition or by facilitating increased repression. In short, regime elites are likely to stage a coup when the election reveals that the risk of a successful popular revolt is high.

We perform a large-N analysis on postelection years in autocracies and find that elections in which the opposition displays strength either by gaining votes or large-scale protests have a substantial effect on attempted incumbent overthrows. However, since these events are relatively rare—autocrats are usually in control of elections—the institution usually works in favor of the current leader as a

coup-proofing strategy. The arguments and findings in this article thus shed additional light on the workings of institutions in autocracies, and contribute to understanding some of the mechanisms through which authoritarian regimes with nominally democratic institutions are at risk of regime breakdown. In sum, this article shows that elections, although potentially stabilizing autocracies if the incumbent wins, can be dangerous if the political opposition displays strength. The decision of an autocrat to hold elections is a gamble that the dictator is not always certain to win.

The article opens up several questions to be explored in further research. First, there is a need to investigate the conditions under which coups are democratizing and autocratizing. We propose that coups following elections can either serve as concessions to the opposition or as platforms for a widespread crackdown and increased repression, but we do not explore the scope conditions for these mechanisms. This distinction can serve as a foundation for exploring the conditions under which coups have a liberalizing or autocratizing effect in the aftermath of elections. How this interacts with the degree to which the opposition is strengthened is worthy of increased scrutiny. Second, the run-up to elections in autocracies may be equally important, as the regime struggles to deal with political rivals before the actual electoral runoff. Since the outcome of elections can have severe consequences for the people in power, the dictator's election campaign also deserves further investigation.

Authors' Note

Replication material is available at: http://www.sv.uio.no/isv/personer/vit/torewig/.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. A detailed discussion on the coding criteria outlined subsequently is available in Powell and Thyne (2011).
2. Ideally, we would have used a media freedom indicator (e.g., Freedom of the Press by Freedom House). However, data coverage on indicators of press freedom is extremely limited. By using the Freedom House measure, for instance, we would be left with 304

observations and only seven coup attempts. In order to keep all our observations and perform a more direct test of our argument, we therefore opted for the Polity IV score as an alternative measure to distinguish informative from noninformative elections. Using all available data, the Freedom House and Polity IV measures correlate at .7995, supporting the expectation that more open authoritarian regimes on the Polity IV scale have freer media environments.

3. The probabilities displayed in the figure were calculated using the margins function in STATA.

4. The raw coefficients of the logit estimations with interactions are presented in the Online Appendix.

5. We have also run regressions where we include country years in which no elections were held (not shown). These regressions indicate that the probability of a coup is higher in election years where the opposition displays strength, than in both election years where the opposition does not display strength and in nonelection years. The results indicate that elections where the opposition displays strength is more dangerous to the incumbent than not holding elections at all.

Supplemental Material

The online appendices are available at http://jcr.sagepub.com/supplemental.

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