

How to Sell a Coup: Elections as Coup Legitimation^{*}

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Journal of Conflict Resolution

Abstract

Unlike other political leaders, leaders coming to power through military coups face a dual legitimation challenge: they must justify not only why they should rule, but also how they came to power. Little attention has been paid to how coup leaders solve this legitimacy deficit, and even less to the audiences of this legitimation. We ask: why do some coup leaders legitimate their coups by holding elections while others do not? Counterintuitively, we argue that coup leaders who oust democratically-elected leaders are less likely to hold elections, except when tied to U.S. military aid. We test these hypotheses through a dataset of military coup regimes from 1946-2014, and trace out mechanisms through case studies of the Nigerian coup of 1983 and the Egyptian coup of 2013. This argument provides a new explanation for the emergence of authoritarian elections and a new perspective on the international dimensions of dictatorship.

^{*} The authors wish to thank Eva Bellin, Suheir Daoud, Amaney Jamal, David Pion-Berlin, Nate Allen, Matthew Cebul, Scott Williamson, audiences at MPSA, ISA, and Princeton, editor Paul Huth and two anonymous reviewers for useful comments.

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Introduction

In 2013, the Egyptian military seized power in a coup d'état, ousting the democratically-elected president Mohamed Morsi. The new military regime immediately faced a crisis of legitimacy, as supporters of the former president refused to accept his ouster and the coup received international condemnation, including the partial suspension of U.S. military aid. The Egyptian military, led by General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, insisted that the coup reflected the popular will, and pledged to promptly organize elections. The elections that were held in 2014 were not considered free and fair, but they handed a resounding victory to now President Sisi, enabling him to claim that his ouster of the previous civilian government had popular electoral legitimacy. Why did the Egyptian military choose to legitimate its rule on the basis of elections? Why did it not opt for a populist ideology, or a technocratic platform? Who were the audiences of the Egyptian military's legitimation, and how did they influence this choice in strategy?

The challenge faced by the Egyptian military after it seized power was hardly unique. After a coup, military rulers must make a series of important decisions about how to consolidate their authority. Foremost among these decisions is how to legitimate their seizure of power. Indeed, leaders coming to power through military coups face a unique, dual legitimation challenge: not only must they answer the standard legitimation question of why they should rule, but they must also justify how they came to power.

We look closely at one very important type of legitimation strategy: elections. In 185 power-seeking military coups since 1946, 53% saw the coup leaders organize elections to legitimate their rule. The decision to claim electoral, procedural legitimacy is particularly puzzling for coup-born regimes, as they owe their very existence to a blatant violation of constitutional procedure. The decision to hold elections is also politically consequential, as those military regimes that hold elections tend to last significantly longer than those that do not (Geddes, 1999). We therefore ask: *Which military rulers hold elections to legitimate their coups?*

We make two arguments. First, we contend that coup leaders who oust democratically-elected leaders should be less likely to hold elections than those ousting autocrats. This counterintuitive finding stems from the reasons behind such coups: coups against democracies normally occur after either a significant portion of the population has become disillusioned with democracy, or because the military opposed the outcome of democratic elections. In the former, there will be little domestic pressure for elections; in the latter, the coup leaders may fear that the ousted parties may again perform well if elections were held. Both possibilities suggest that coups overthrowing democracies should be less likely to see elections.

Our second argument qualifies the first. We argue that coup leaders who oust democratically-elected leaders but who depend on military aid from Western democracies – primarily the United States – will need to present a democratic façade to avoid an aid suspension. While the US government generally prefers to continue its assistance after a coup, it often faces significant opposition in Congress and civil society when the coup occurs against a democracy. Coup leaders in previously democratic states therefore face unique pressure to organize elections in order to guarantee the continuation of U.S. military aid. In these cases, the primary audience of the coup leader’s electoral legitimation is not domestic, but international. We are not claiming that military regimes tied to US aid necessarily democratize. Instead we argue that a dependence on US aid makes coup leaders overthrowing democracies more likely to present democratic window dressing.

Two years after the Egyptian military’s coup, the U.S. government moved to reinstate military aid. Although the post-coup elections had not been free and fair and serious human rights issues remained, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry praised Egypt for its “hard work in transitioning to a democracy through their election” (Kerry, 2014). Having presented cosmetic reforms, Egypt was able to help the U.S. government push back against Congress and civil society and ensure the restoration of U.S. aid.

This paper seeks to contribute to the literature in three ways. First, we observe that coup leaders face a unique, dual legitimacy crisis, and consider the deeply impactful

but largely neglected decision of how – and to whom – to legitimate a coup. Second, our work can help explain why elections arise in some authoritarian regimes. There is a growing literature on the variety of legislative institutions that develop in authoritarian states.¹ By studying the critical juncture at which military leaders determine the direction of the regime, we can help better explain how and why these authoritarian institutions emerge. In particular, we find that for coup-born regimes, the desire for legitimacy appears to be a more important motivation for elections than the need to coopt the opposition or coordinate the ruling coalition. Finally, we aim to contribute to the literature on international influences on dictatorship. By linking military aid and coup legitimation strategies we show how international actors shape the choices made by military leaders, and impact the future course of these regimes.

This paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 sets out our puzzle, describing the dual legitimation challenge faced by leaders of coups and placing it into the literature. Section 3 presents our theory, explaining why coups against democratically elected leaders should be the least likely to see elections, except in countries tied to U.S. military aid. Sections 4 and 5 present our methodology for collecting our data and the results. Section 6 then teases out the mechanisms behind the statistical correlations through case studies of Nigeria and Egypt. We conclude in Section 7 with an eye toward future research.

The Dual Legitimation Challenge

A central challenge for every leader is how to legitimate his or her authority, that is, how to acquire the voluntary compliance or obedience of others to his or her rule (Weber, 1968, p. 212). Leaders seek legitimacy particularly from those whose consent is required to sustain their regime (Alagappa, 1995), whether influential security and business elites, the politically significant public, and in some cases, international partners. While compliance could also be obtained purely through repression and cooptation, such cost-

¹ For excellent literature reviews, see Gandhi and Lust-Okar (2009) and Morse (2012).

benefit approaches tend to produce “a relatively unstable situation” (Weber, 1968, p. 213), as the leader lacks the reservoir of voluntary cooperation that can help him or her survive moments of crisis. Acquiring legitimacy offers a complementary and often more sustainable approach to maintaining power (Beetham, 1991; Gerschewski, 2013). An important task for any leader is therefore to convince others why he or she is the right person to rule.

Leaders coming to power through military coups, however, face a dual legitimation challenge: not only must they answer the standard question of why they should be the one to rule, but they must also justify how they came to power. Since at least the 1950s, there has been a strong norm that military coups represent the breakdown of democracy, of constitutional order, and of civil-military relations (Huntington, 1957, 1991). Even if they are the most qualified for the position, coup leaders must legitimate coming to power through extra-constitutional means. This additional legitimation challenge is unique to leaders of coups: democratically elected leaders, for instance, can claim to follow procedure and represent the people, monarchs make their claim based on hereditary rule, and leaders of revolutions make their claim based on popular support for their revolutionary manifesto. The military as an institution with no apparent political manifesto or constitutional claim to power faces a uniquely difficult task in legitimating its new regime.

This legitimacy deficit may be one reason that military regimes collapse more quickly than civilian or monarchical ones (Geddes, 1999, 2003; Lai and Slater, 2006; Magaloni, 2006; Geddes et al., 2014; Debs, 2016). While existing accounts tend to attribute the fragility of military regimes to officers’ desire for unity (Geddes, 1999, 2003) or their ability to secure improved post-tenure fates under democracy (Debs, 2016), more recent work suggests that military regimes collapse because they are more likely to face protests and crises of legitimacy than civilian regimes (Malik and Williamson, 2017). Moreover, as Kim and Kroeger (2017) observe, there remains substantial variation in the duration of military regimes, with some surviving as long as their civilian counterparts. Much of this variation can be explained by coup leaders’ levels of do-

mestic and international legitimacy. [Thyne et al. \(2017\)](#), for instance, find that coup regimes that face more negative domestic and international reactions collapse more quickly, while those who have more legitimacy last longer. How could coup leaders legitimate their seizures of power?

The literature on legitimation provides several answers. Coup leaders could hang their hat on performance legitimacy ([White, 1986](#)), promising to improve the economic and security conditions that preceded the coup. They may invoke an ideological or religious justification ([Lane, 1984](#)); General Efraim Rios Montt of Guatemala famously declared that the “true Christian carries a Bible in one hand and a machine gun in the other.” Others may develop a cult of personality and seek legitimacy on charismatic grounds ([Weber, 1968](#)). Still others may hold elections and attempt to acquire democratic or procedural legitimacy.

In taking a first cut at this question, we focus in particular on claims to electoral legitimacy. Why is it that some militaries tend to hold elections in order to justify their coups, while others do not? Of 185 successful military coups in our dataset, 53% saw the coup leaders organize elections, suggesting that there is considerable variation in legitimation strategies.

Elections are intended to provide procedural legitimacy, where the regime legitimizes itself domestically and internationally by employing a widely accepted procedure for demonstrating popular support for its assumption of power and policy agenda. Post-coup elections are often characterized as referendums on the coup, granting the coup legitimacy even when the elections are not free and fair. In post-coup Egypt, for instance, where a constitutional referendum was approved with 98 percent of the vote and General Sisi became president with 96 percent, these elections were seen by *The New York Times* as votes “to validate the military ouster of their first fairly elected president,” ([Kirkpatrick, 2014a](#)) and by NPR as an “endorsement of not only [Sisi’s] presidency, but the road map that’s been put into place” ([Fadel, 2014](#)) since the coup.

A common misconception is that if elections are not free and fair, they could not possibly provide a regime with legitimacy. However, both democracy and legitimacy

are questions of degree, and by placing their regime in the “nebulous zone” between full autocracy and full democracy, these leaders “try to obtain at least a semblance of democratic legitimacy” (Schedler 2002, p. 36; Levitsky and Way 2010; Morgenbesser 2016; Knutsen et al. 2017). Even among academics, such regimes are typically classified separately from full autocracies, whether as liberalized autocracies, electoral autocracies, competitive authoritarianism, etc., giving them at least a degree of electoral legitimacy.

We focus on claims to electoral legitimacy for two reasons. First, empirically, military rulers are over 30 percent less likely to hold elections than civilian ones (Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007, p. 1285), making their decision to do so particularly interesting. With a “ready-made institution to organize their rule” (Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007, p. 1284), military regimes are thought to have less need to coopt other elites or the population at large through elections. Relatedly, coup-born regimes should seemingly have the most difficult time establishing procedural legitimacy, given that their coups represent flagrant violations of constitutional procedures. Why some coup regimes still attempt to assert electoral legitimacy is a truly puzzling phenomenon.

Secondly, those military rulers that hold elections tend to stay in power significantly longer than those who do not. Geddes (1999), for instance, finds that military-party and military-personalist regimes (both of which are likely correlated with holding elections) have significantly greater durability than purely military regimes. Similarly, in our dataset, the median duration of coup-born regimes that held elections was approximately 88 months (7.3 years), while coup regimes that did not hold elections lasted only 24 months (2 years). The question of why some coup leaders attempt to legitimate their coups through elections is thus not only theoretically puzzling but also empirically consequential.²

² For autocratic regimes generally, Knutsen et al. (2017) similarly find that elections have a stabilizing effect on autocracies in the long-term. Beyond survival, holding elections may also have other downstream consequences. Miller (2015), for instance, finds that autocracies that hold elections are less likely to democratize, but conditional on democratization, more

Determinants of Authoritarian Elections

The growing literature on authoritarian elections provides limited answers to why some coup leaders would hold elections. Existing studies focus primarily on domestic motivations such as the need to coopt the opposition or facilitate coordination among a ruling coalition, motivations that the same literature believes to be least applicable to military regimes. The international explanations for authoritarian elections, on the other hand, tend to be underspecified, producing mixed results in quantitative analyses. Our paper provides a new domestic explanation for authoritarian elections and refines the measures of international pressure for coup regimes.

Domestically, elections are thought to play two primary functions beyond providing legitimacy. First, elections may help to coopt the opposition ([Lust-Okar, 2006](#); [Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007](#); [Reuter and Robertson, 2015](#)). Authoritarian institutions, in this view, allow the autocrat to buy off the opposition “by sharing spoils or by making policy compromises” ([Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007](#), p. 1283). Moreover, authoritarian elections could provide information on which districts to punish and which to reward, facilitating cooptation of the masses ([Blaydes, 2011](#)).

In the second school of thought, elections are seen as a means of coordinating the ruling coalition. [Boix and Svolik \(2013\)](#) argue that elections facilitate authoritarian power-sharing by “alleviating commitment and monitoring problems between the dictator and his allies” (p. 300, see also [Myerson, 2008](#)). Relatedly, rigged elections could help portray a “public image of invincibility [...] discourag[ing] potential divisions within the ruling party” ([Magaloni 2006](#), p. 9; see also [Brownlee 2007](#)). Finally, elections may serve as decentralized channels for deciding how to distribute spoils among members of the ruling party ([Blaydes, 2011](#); [Malesky and Schuler, 2011](#)).

Both of these domestic explanations are only weakly applicable to military regimes. Given that military regimes, like monarchical ones, already have an institution to organize their rule, they are thought to have less need to coopt either the opposition

likely to consolidate.

or other elites ([Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007](#), p. 1284). Indeed, most quantitative studies of authoritarian elections control for military regimes, with the assumption that they have the least need for the functions performed by these institutions. Moreover, in the initial moments of a coup regime, when coup leaders are suffering from a unique dual legitimacy deficit, the legitimation function of elections is likely the most pressing concern. Indeed, in our analysis, we find that resource wealth and protests – two factors that are thought to influence a dictator’s need to coopt the opposition and coordinate allies – have little impact on whether military regimes hold elections. To supplement these domestic explanations, we contend that at least for coup-born regimes, an additional domestic source of variation in elections is whether the ousted regime was democratic or autocratic.

Just as autocrats require domestic support, they may also require acceptance by international audiences to secure resources necessary for consolidation. A third function that elections can play is therefore international: they may help regimes legitimate their rule abroad and thereby secure aid, trade, status, or other preferential treatment from Western democracies. However, the few quantitative studies that have examined these international factors tend to use loose proxies for external pressure and find conflicting results. [Gandhi and Przeworski \(2007\)](#) find that the number of democracies in the world has a significant effect in predicting authoritarian elections, while [Boix and Svolik \(2013\)](#) find that formal military alliances with the U.S. are correlated with the maintenance but not the creation of authoritarian legislatures. [Miller \(2017\)](#) makes considerable progress by finding that external leverage for elections increases with the number of electoral autocracies in the region and greater dependence on democracies for trade, alliances, and foreign aid. We contribute by demonstrating that among these various linkages, military rulers are most vulnerable to military assistance rather than economic aid, trade, alliances, or regional pressure.

Which Coup Leaders Hold Elections?

We contend that the coup regimes least likely to hold elections are those overthrowing democratic regimes, except when they are tied to U.S. military aid. Let us take each part of this argument in turn.

Previously Democratic Regimes

The reason previously democratic regimes should be the least likely to see elections stems from why such regimes fell to coups in the first place. Democracies are the least likely regime type to fall to military coups, but when they do, they generally do so under one of two circumstances.³ The first possibility is that the population has become disillusioned with democracy, and yearns for a reversal to a strongman to bring back stability and security. Democratic transitions occasionally produce economic downturns and a worsened security environment that engender support for a military intervention. Economic crises have been found to have a strong effect on democratic breakdown through military coups ([Londregan and Poole, 1990](#); [Gasiorowski, 1995](#); [Maeda, 2010](#); [Svolik, 2015](#)), as has mass disillusionment with democracy ([Norris, 1998](#); [Canache, 2002](#); [Booth and Seligson, 2009](#); [Rose et al., 2011](#)).

The second avenue by which democratic transitions fall to military coups is when the military opposes the outcome of democratic elections. In Turkey, Algeria, and Egypt, for instance, democratic elections have brought Islamists to power, spurring largely secular militaries to cancel these democratic experiments ([Cook, 2007](#); [Nassif, 2017](#)). Decades earlier, Latin American militaries similarly overthrew democracies that brought communists to power ([Needler, 1964](#); [Nordlinger, 1977](#)). Beyond ideology, militaries may feel threatened by democratically-elected governments who seek to encroach on their institutional interests by cutting defense budgets or limit-

³ As [Lindberg and Clark \(2008\)](#) note, “it is only when democratic regimes perform dismally and/or do not pay soldiers their salaries that they are at great risk of being overthrown” (p. 86).

ing the military's influence over national security decisions (Finer, 1962; Stepan, 1971; Nordlinger, 1977; Stepan, 1988; Horowitz, 1980). In this second avenue, militaries overthrow democratically-elected governments which they oppose on ideological or institutional grounds.

Therefore, coups in previously democratic regimes generally occur when the population no longer wants democracy, and/or when the military no longer wants democracy. In either of these scenarios, the subsequent coup regime is unlikely to pursue elections. In the disillusionment-induced coups, there will be little pressure from the population for the coup regime to hold elections or present democratic window dressing. Where a military opposed the outcome of democratic elections, it is unlikely to pursue elections to legitimate its rule, fearing that those elections, even if rigged, could bring those ousted parties back to power.

In both paths leading to a military coup against a democracy, therefore, coup leaders should be unlikely to pursue electoral legitimacy. However, there is one situation in which they still may: when they are pressured by the international community.

U.S. Military Aid

Among the various forms of external leverage, military aid is the most important for pressuring coup leaders, as their primary support base tends to be the military. Militaries receiving aid from Western democracies risk losing that aid by overthrowing democratically-elected governments. To maintain the flow of aid, we argue that such coup leaders are under pressure to legitimate their coups to Western audiences by presenting democratic window dressing.

Among Western democracies, the United States is the primary provider of military assistance in terms of both scale and scope, providing aid to every region of the world. U.S. aid is generally provided with the implicit or explicit goal of furthering democracy and human rights. The 1961 Foreign Assistance Act, for instance, explicitly conditioned foreign aid on human rights standards. Even during the *realpolitik* of the Cold War, the U.S. often suspended military aid following coups against democracies, for instance

in Honduras (1963), Dominican Republic (1963), Greece (1967), and Argentina (1976). After the Cold War, this norm was then codified into law through a 1997 amendment to the U.S. Foreign Assistance Act, which stipulated that non-humanitarian aid must be suspended to any “country whose duly elected head of government is deposed by military coup or decree,” and can only be reinstated once the president determines that “a democratically-elected government has taken office.” This norm and subsequent law suggest that aid should be suspended following coups in democracies, where, unlike coups against autocracies, they clearly represent democratic backsliding.

Coup leaders would prefer to avoid an aid suspension. U.S. military aid is often a critical source of weapons, training, and prestige, and its suspension may disillusion the officer corps with the coup and encourage fissures between the military and coup leader. Unlike for development aid, switching donors is particularly difficult for military aid, as existing U.S. planes and vehicles would need American spare parts to remain operable. Further, even if the military may have come to power with pledges of technocratic reform and economic transformation, or ideologically re-ordering the political system, the maintenance of military aid is often essential for the military to retain its capacity to coerce and repress and thereby fulfill these promises.

To avoid an aid suspension, or regain aid if it had immediately been suspended, a coup leader would need to demonstrate his democratic credentials to the U.S. Yet, the U.S. often puts its preference for democracy aside when its strategic interests are at stake (e.g., [Jamal, 2012](#); [Miller, 2017](#)). Indeed, the countries which the U.S. supplies with military aid are countries in which it has national security interests: that was likely the reason for providing military aid in the first place. It therefore has strategic interests in continuing military aid despite the coup – a motivation coup plotters are often aware of.⁴

⁴ Ahead of the Honduran coup of 1963, U.S. Ambassador Charles Burrows warned the Honduran military that aid would be suspended if they were to stage a coup. Yet given the U.S. interests in Honduras, the coup plotters were confident that even if suspended, aid “would be back in six months” following an appearance of elections ([Euraque, 1996](#), p. 113).

However, the U.S. government typically faces considerable pressure from Congress and civil society to suspend aid after a coup against a democratically-elected leader. In order to justify its maintenance or resumption of military aid to these domestic audiences, the U.S. government would prefer the coup regime at least make cosmetic reforms such as holding (even noncompetitive) elections so that the U.S. government can at a minimum claim that the coup regime is making progress toward democracy.

Three years after the U.S. suspended military aid to Greece, for instance, aid was reinstated, with the U.S. State Department citing that “although the United States had hoped for a more rapid return to representative government in Greece, the trend toward a constitutional order is established.”⁵ Yet these cosmetic reforms – in this case, the election of an advisory council stacked with supporters of the junta – were not the true reason for the resumption of aid. The reason was strategic. “The resumption of such shipments,” the U.S. State Department argued, “will enhance the ability of the Greek forces to carry out their responsibilities in defense of the NATO area.”⁶ Given the strategic interests the U.S. has in countries to which it provides military aid, a democratic façade is all that is necessary for the resumption of aid following a coup.

This theoretical discussion brings us to the following hypothesis: coup leaders overthrowing democracies should be the least likely to hold elections, except when tied to U.S. military aid.

Data and Methods

Coup Regimes

To test this theory, we collect a dataset of military coup regimes between 1946 and 2014. While existing literature tends to use country-year datasets, such an approach

⁵ Quoted in: Associated Press, “U.S. Resumes Military Aid to Greece,” *Herald-Journal*, September 23, 1970.

⁶ Ibid.

may confound our analysis. Coup regimes that do not hold elections will continue to accumulate country-year observations, overweighting these regimes and their particular covariates. Muammar Qaddafi’s Libya, for instance, would add 42 ‘previously autocratic’ and ‘no foreign aid’ country-year observations, potentially biasing results. To weigh each coup evenly, our approach is to build a dataset where the unit of analysis is the coup regime, even though this results in a significantly lower N.

We begin with a new dataset from [Thyne et al. \(2017\)](#) that includes all successful coups between 1950 and 2010 with the time (in months) the coup leaders survive in power.⁷ We then merge in coups from [Marshall and Marshall \(2015\)](#), which extends the dataset back to 1946 and forward to 2014, adding 17 coups.⁸ For our purposes, we are interested only in coup leaders who intend to stay in power, not those who seek to cede power as soon as possible to elected or appointed civilians. While determining intentions is difficult, we pursued the following strategy to identify “power-seeking” coups:⁹

First, if the coup leaders transferred power to an appointed civilian and gave up executive power, we inferred their intentions as seeking to cede power. By contrast, if

⁷ We remove 15 entries that were better classified as palace coups, revolutions, or unsuccessful military coups rather than successful military coups: Haiti 1956, Grenada 1979, Brazil March 1964, Bolivia 1952, Benin December 1965, Central African Republic 1979, Congo August 1968, Lesotho 1994, Swaziland 1983, Comoros 1989, Yemen 1978, Yemen 1986, Qatar 1995, Oman 1970, and Pakistan 1971.

⁸ These include Haiti 1946, Syria March 1949, Syria August 1949, Syria December 1949, Haiti 1950, Laos 1959, Mauritania 1979, Fiji 1987, Suriname 1990, Fiji 2006, Mauritania 2008, Niger 2010, Egypt 2011, Guinea-Bissau 2012, Mali 2012, Egypt 2013, and Thailand 2014. In coding the end-dates, we followed the coding rules of [Thyne et al. \(2017\)](#). To demonstrate, we have included brief summaries of Haiti 1946 and Mali 2012 in the appendix.

⁹ We are focused on determining the original intentions of the coup leader upon assuming power. Thus, coup leaders who at first intend to remain in power but later decide to step down, are coded as power-seeking.

the coup leaders appointed a civilian figurehead but retained power behind the scenes, we coded their coup as power-seeking. In making this coding, we examined whether the coup leaders a) exerted pressure over the choice of civilian successor, and b) continued to overtly play a decision-making role on policy beyond national defense, such as by retaining ministerial positions. For example, the May 1957 coup in Haiti, during which General Leon Cantave gave up power after five days to Daniel Fignole, a compromise candidate chosen by political parties, and then retired, was coded as not power seeking. However, the March 1962 coup in Argentina, in which the coup plotters permitted a civilian, Jose Guido, to assume the presidency only after he committed in writing to execute their preferred policies, was coded as power-seeking. Five coups were coded as not power seeking by this pathway.¹⁰

Second, if the coup leaders organized an election in which they did not participate and handed over power to the victor without complaint, we also inferred their intentions as seeking to cede power. If they instead ran in elections, whether winning or losing (as in the Ivory Coast in 1999-2000), or rigged the election in favor of a civilian partner (such as in Panama 1968-1981), they were instead coded as seeking to remain in power. Eighteen coups were classified as ceding power through elections.¹¹

Through these two procedures, we therefore classify 23 coups as not seeking power.¹²

While fascinating in and of themselves, these 23 non-power seeking coups are relatively

¹⁰ Along with Haiti 1957 (May), these include: Brazil 1955, Guatemala 1957, Ecuador 1966, and Fiji 1987.

¹¹ These include: Syria 1954; Honduras 1956; Colombia 1957; Myanmar 1958; Peru 1963; Sierra Leone 1968; Benin 1969; Bolivia 1978 (November); Honduras 1978; Ghana 1979; Guatemala 1983; Sudan 1985; Lesotho 1991; Mali 1991; Sierra Leone 1996; Niger 1999; Guinea-Bissau 2003; and Niger 2010.

¹² Only seven of these coups can be classified as ‘democratizing coups’ (Marinov and Goemans, 2014; Thyne and Powell, 2016; Miller, 2016) where the Polity score was 6 or higher in the year following the end of the coup. These include Syria 1954; Colombia 1957; Myanmar 1958; Ghana 1979; Sudan 1985; Mali 1991; and Niger 2010.

tangential to our question. We are not interested in those few coup leaders who want to give up power, but instead in the legitimization strategies of the vast majority who want to retain power. While we will use the full sample in robustness checks,¹³ in the subsequent analyses, we will exclude these 23 coups from our dataset, leaving us with a final sample of 185 “power-seeking” coups (see Table 3 in the Appendix for the complete list).

Dependent and Independent Variables

Our primary dependent variable is whether or not the coup leaders attempted to legitimate their coups through elections. We therefore merge our dataset of coup regimes with a list of elections from the National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) dataset (Hyde and Marinov, 2012) to find the first post-coup election, if any, within a coup regime. We code our dependent variable dichotomously with a 1 if a coup regime held elections to legitimate its rule. Of the 185 coup regimes, 98 (53%) held elections.

We hypothesized that military coups ousting democratically-elected leaders would be the least likely to see elections, except when tied to U.S. military aid. To code whether the ousted regime was democratic or autocratic, we use the Polity score in the year prior to the coup, with 6 or higher indicating an established democracy and -88 indicating transitioning. We also examined each coup by hand to check whether

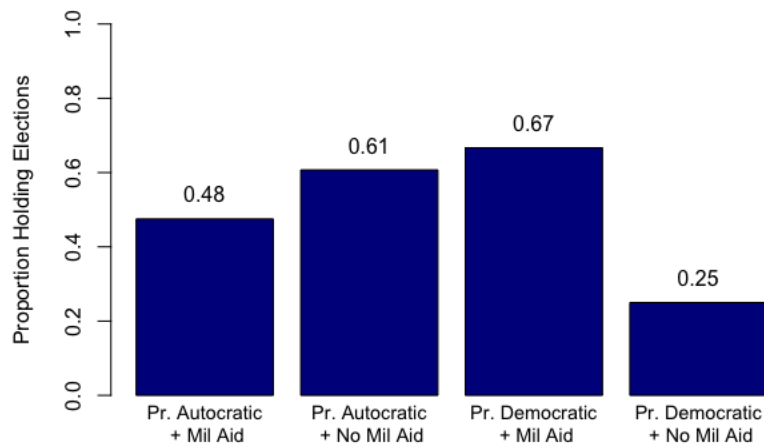
¹³ We run the analysis on the full sample because we want to be transparent about any potential biases in coding which coups were power-seeking. For instance, if coup regimes tied to U.S. aid were better at putting forth a civilian façade, we may systematically have (incorrectly) coded them as not power-seeking. More generally, there may be cases where the military is exerting covert pressure that is difficult for scholars to observe, particularly when the civilians in power are already ideologically aligned with the military’s preferred policies. However, given that results hold even with the full sample, we believe these biases are not severe.

a transition to democracy occurred prior to but in the same year as the coup, and coded these as previously democratic. By our measure, of 185 coups, 49 (26%) ousted democratic regimes.

To test the second half of the hypothesis, we obtain data on U.S. military aid from the U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants (the Greenbook).¹⁴ Those cases receiving any U.S. military aid in the year prior to the coup were coded as a 1. About 61% of coups (113 of 185) were tied to U.S. military aid. In robustness checks, we also examine the amount of military aid as a continuous variable, standardized per soldier or as a percent of the domestic military budget, both from the National Military Capabilities Dataset from the Correlates of War Project (Singer et al., 1972).

Figure 1 divides the sample of coups into four categories based on the two independent variables. The fourth column, representing coups ousting previously democratic regimes and not tied to U.S. military aid, are the least likely to hold elections, with only 25% of them doing so. However, among coups ousting democracies but that are tied to U.S. military aid, 67% hold elections, equivalent to or even higher than coups in countries that were previously autocratic.

Figure 1: Which Coup Leaders Hold Elections?



¹⁴ See here: <http://catalog.data.gov/dataset/us-overseas-loans-and-grants-greenbook-usaid-1554>

Regressions

To test the statistical significance of these relationships, we conduct logistic regressions below. We present an interaction between U.S. military aid and whether the country was previously democratic. Since both are dummy variables, the coefficient on ‘previously democratic’ alone would represent those coups ousting democratic regimes but which were not tied to U.S. military aid. This coefficient we expect to be negative, as we expect these regimes to be the least likely to hold elections. The interaction coefficient then represents the additional effect of being tied to U.S. military aid while ousting a democracy. We expect this term to be positive, as they should be more likely to hold elections than those without U.S military aid.

Table 1 presents logistic regressions for the likelihood of holding an election. Model 1 presents our hypothesis without controls; models 2 and 3 add controls. In the second regression model, we include nine covariates that may affect whether coup leaders decide to hold elections. We control for the log of per capita GDP in the year of the coup, the growth rate of per capita GDP in the year of the coup, and each of these in the year prior to the coup. In addition, we control for the log of the country’s population, whether the coup was led by a junior or senior officer,¹⁵ and a post-Cold War dummy. Following the electoral authoritarianism literature, we control for whether oil accounts for a third or more of total exports, as countries with resource wealth are thought to have less need to use elections to coopt the opposition (Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007, p. 1285) or coordinate the ruling coalition (Boix and Svolik, 2013, p. 308). Finally, to more precisely measure the coup leader’s need for cooperation, we include a dummy for whether the coup was ushered in by protests against the previous leader (from Thyne et al. (2017)). Coups undertaken with such public support likely have less need for coopting the masses through elections.

In model 3, we add two additional controls, both from Thyne et al. (2017): whether there were protests in the six months following the coup, and the international reaction

¹⁵ We code Generals and chiefs of staff as senior officers, all else as junior officers.

to the coup. Both of these variables introduce endogeneity, as they could be affected by the decision to hold elections (the dependent variable); we therefore include these in a separate model just a robustness check. Finally, in all models, we follow [Carter and Signorino \(2010\)](#) and account for temporal dependence with a cubic polynomial of time since the first coup in the dataset (1946).

Table 1 shows strong evidence of our hypotheses, with or without controls. In all models, the sign on previous democracy is negative and significant at the .05 level, suggesting that coups that overthrow democracies and are not tied to U.S. military aid are less likely to see elections. And yet, in line with our qualification, the interaction between previous democracy and U.S. military aid is positive and significant at the .01 level in all models, suggesting that coups overthrowing democracies tied to U.S. military aid are significantly more likely to see elections.

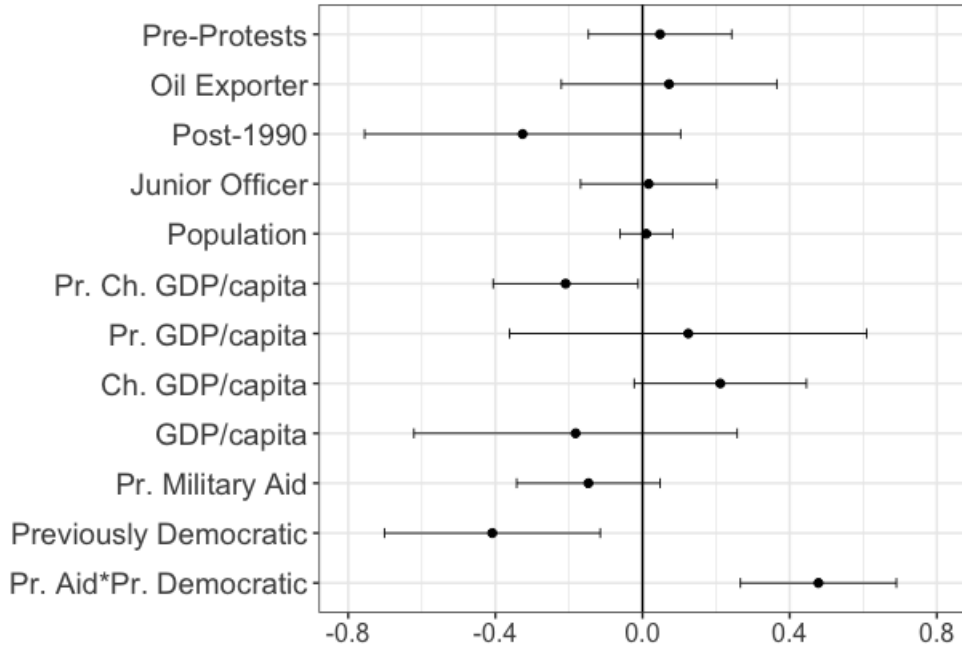
Table 1: Elections as Coup Legitimation (logit)

	<i>DV: Elections</i>		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
prev. democracy	−1.600** (0.697)	−1.757** (0.748)	−1.770** (0.788)
prev. democracy*	2.311*** (0.821)	2.572*** (0.898)	2.852*** (0.941)
prev. military aid			
prev. military aid	−0.555 (0.371)	−0.602 (0.408)	−0.562 (0.445)
GDP/capita		−0.734 (0.888)	2.942 (4.042)
Δ GDP/capita		0.853* (0.473)	0.704 (0.685)
prev. GDP/capita		0.501 (0.980)	−3.210 (4.102)
prev. Δ GDP/capita		−0.843** (0.398)	−0.769 (0.567)
population		0.041 (0.145)	0.060 (0.160)
junior officer		0.067 (0.374)	0.196 (0.398)
post-1990		−1.384 (1.055)	−3.319** (1.434)
oil exporter		0.295 (0.612)	0.579 (0.662)
pre-protests		0.193 (0.397)	0.582 (0.439)
post-protests			−1.479** (0.589)
intl reaction			0.180 (0.487)
cubic polynomial (time)	✓	✓	✓
Constant	2.789** (1.147)	4.223* (2.377)	−2.825 (6.121)
Observations	185	183	168
Log Likelihood	−116.337	−110.506	−98.608
Akaike Inf. Crit.	246.673	253.012	233.216

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

The substantive effects of each of these relationships are also quite large. Figure 2 presents the marginal effects from model 2. The last two coefficients suggest that coups in previously democratic countries are 41% less likely to see post-coup elections, except in previously democratic countries tied to U.S. military aid, where they are 48% more likely to see elections.

Figure 2: Marginal Effects Plot for Elections



Our motivation for employing a coup regime set-up was that a time series approach may overweight certain cases and bias results. Table 4 in the appendix provides suggestive evidence of this concern. Models 1 and 3 employ a country-year and country-month set-up, respectively. Our main results are in the right direction but lose significance. To account for potential overweighting, in models 2 and 4, we then control for the total number of observations each coup regime has (i.e., the total duration in either years or months). Once controlling for the number of observations, the signs on both previous democracy and previous democracies tied to U.S. military aid regain statistical significance, suggesting that a time-series set-up indeed introduced bias.

We thus find strong evidence for our hypothesis: coup leaders who oust democratically-elected leaders are the least likely to hold elections, except when tied to U.S. military aid. This suggests that an important domestic determinant of authoritarian elections, at least in coup-born regimes, is the type of previous regime. Substantively, the effect of previous regime type is considerably stronger than commonly used predictors like per capita GDP and economic growth. Moreover, existing domestic explanations for autocratic elections – as proxied by oil wealth and protests ushering in the coup – were not significant for coup regimes. Domestically, the most important predictor is previous regime type.

Our results also reveal a powerful international determinant of authoritarian elections: U.S. military aid. This serves as a refinement over previous measures of international pressure such as the number of democracies in the world, especially in the specific context of coup leaders overthrowing democracies and thereby jeopardizing their supply of U.S. aid. In line with our theory, military rulers also care more about military aid than other international linkages. Table 5 in the Appendix shows that results do not obtain when using U.S. economic aid, fraction of trade with democracies, fraction of alliances with democracies, or the number of electoral authoritarian regimes in the region.¹⁶ Moreover, Table 6 shows that the effect of U.S. military aid holds even controlling for these other international linkages.

One may fear that these aid results are being driven by some selection effect: that the U.S. targets for military aid countries that for some other reason tend to hold elections post-coup. To test for this possibility, we can look at those coups occurring in countries tied to U.S. military aid but were not democratic prior to the coup (the third line in Table 1). If there were a selection effect in who the U.S. targets for aid, then these countries should be more likely to hold elections as well. On the contrary, aid appears to have no effect on coups in previously autocratic countries, suggesting that U.S. aid is not targeted toward countries with a greater latent propensity for a

¹⁶ Economic aid data is also from the Greenbook. Trade, alliance, and regional EA data obtained from [Miller \(2017\)](#).

post-coup democratic façade.

Instead of aid as a dichotomous measure, Table 7 in the Appendix employs two continuous measures, military aid per soldier and as a percent of the military’s domestic budget. For either variable, the interaction with previous democracy is significant at the .01 level, suggesting that for coups ousting democracies, the likelihood of holding elections increases with not only the presence of military aid but also the amount of military aid. This result provides suggestive evidence for the mechanism, demonstrating that how reliant the coup leaders are on U.S. military aid indeed may affect their desire to present a democratic façade to the U.S.

Recent scholarship contends that Western pressure to hold elections has increased after the Cold War, as autocrats no longer have the Soviet Union to turn to as an alternative source of aid and trade (Marinov and Goemans, 2014; Thyne and Powell, 2016). This raises the possibility that our results may be driven by the post-Cold War era. While our analysis already includes a post-Cold War dummy and cubic time trends, Table 8 in the Appendix demonstrates that a triple interaction between military aid, previously democratic, and post-Cold War is not significant: the effect of military aid on previously democratic countries is no stronger before or after the Cold War. Moreover, models 2 and 3 show that when subsetting the data, results actually hold for the Cold War period but *not* for the post-Cold War period, although this is likely due to sample size – there are only 28 power-seeking coups after the Cold War.¹⁷ Finally, Figure 4 (Appendix) presents the data for each decade separately. Descriptively, the pattern appears to hold for every time period, before or after the Cold War.

¹⁷ Another possibility is that after the Cold War, most coup regimes hold elections, and thus there is little variation left to explain. During the Cold War, only 50% (78 of 157) of coup regimes held elections, while after the Cold War, 71% (20 of 28) of coup regimes held elections. In Table 1, models 2-3, the post-Cold War dummy is negative rather than positive due to collinearity with the cubic time polynomial and per capita GDP.

The results are also robust to the exclusion of short-lived coup regimes that may not last long enough to hold an election. The quickest elections in our dataset occurred two months after their coups (Paraguay 1954 and Togo 2005), yet 6 coups did not last even two months. Overall, the median time to election in the dataset is 2.17 years. Table 9 (Appendix) therefore experiments with several cut-offs, showing that results hold when excluding coup regimes that do not last for 6 months, 1 year, 1.5 years, 2 years, and 2.5 years. More generally, model 6 demonstrates that results hold when controlling for the duration that the coup regime survives.

Another time-related question occurs on the other end: perhaps elections that are held long after the coup represent a new legitimization strategy, rather than the coup leader's original strategy. While the median time to election is 2.17 years, the mean time is 3.1 years, pulled to the right by a handful of slow elections occurring 9-11 years after the coup (see histogram of time to elections, Figure 5 in the appendix). Table 10 (Appendix) experiments with recoding the dependent variable with only elections occurring within 7 years, 6 years, and 5 years of the coup. Results appear to hold regardless of cut-off.

One may wonder if results change when using the full universe of coups, rather than limiting the analysis to power-seeking coups. Given that all 23 non-power-seeking coups would be coded as not legitimating their rule through elections, their inclusion may weaken the results, especially if coups ousting democracies and tied to U.S. aid are less likely to be power-seeking. However, Table 11 in the Appendix finds that though weaker, all results hold when including the non-power-seeking coups. Indeed, using power-seeking as the dependent variable, coups ousting democracies are actually more likely to be power seeking, providing further support for the notion that coups against democracies occur when the population and/or military have become disillusioned with democracy.

[Marinov and Goemans \(2014\)](#) employ a more expansive definition of coups (whether carried out by the military or by other government insiders or rebels), and find that coups are more likely to be followed by competitive elections in countries tied to West-

ern development aid, especially after the Cold War. Our data suggest that at least for military coups, most post-coup elections are not competitive, let alone democratic. Of the 98 post-coup elections in our data, only 38 meet [Marinov and Goemans](#)’s threshold for competitive elections, namely, that 1) political opposition is allowed, 2) multiple parties are allowed, and 3) that the office of the incumbent leader is contested (all from NELDA). A more stringent threshold, which adds that 4) opposition leaders were not prevented from running, 5) the government did not harass the opposition, 6) there was no significant violence against civilians, 7) monitors were not denied the opportunity to be present, and 8) there were no significant concerns that elections would not be free and fair, would find that only three of these post-coup elections could be considered democratic. Moreover, employing [Marinov and Goemans](#)’ definition, our results regarding U.S. aid and previously democratic countries appear driven by sham elections, not by competitive ones. Table 12 in the Appendix finds that results hold when sham elections are coded as the dependent variable, but not when competitive elections are. These findings suggest that coup leaders overthrowing democracies and tied to U.S. aid are more likely to hold sham elections than competitive ones.

Corollary: Duration of Coup Regimes

One motivation for studying electoral legitimation strategies was that regimes that hold elections tend to last longer. In this corollary, we demonstrate that coup leaders who overthrow democracies but are tied to U.S. military aid are more durable than those who are not tied to U.S. military aid, and that this effect on durability is mediated precisely through holding elections.

The dependent variable in this analysis is the length of time a coup regime survived (in months). Eight coup regimes are right-censored, meaning still surviving at the time of this study (May 2017), necessitating a survival analysis setup. Given that most coup regimes collapse fairly quickly (see histogram, Figure 5 in the Appendix), a survival model with a declining hazard rate is most appropriate for this analysis.

Following [Thyne et al. \(2017\)](#), we therefore analyze the duration of coup regimes using a Weibull model assuming accelerated failure time (AFT). Results, however, are robust to running a Cox proportional hazards model.¹⁸

Table 2 presents the results of this survival analysis. Models 1 and 3 demonstrate that coup regimes ousting democracies tied to U.S. military aid last significantly longer than those not tied to U.S. military aid, with or without controls.¹⁹ Models 2 and 4 then present a mediation analysis following [Baron and Kenny \(1986\)](#), noting that these effects disappear when controlling for our hypothesized mediator, elections.

¹⁸ Results available from authors.

¹⁹ We add one additional control to those already in Table 1: whether the coup leaders held elections to legitimate their rule but lost those elections (13 cases). Having lost, they cannot be expected to enjoy the benefits of increased longevity in office. Our main findings hold with or without this covariate.

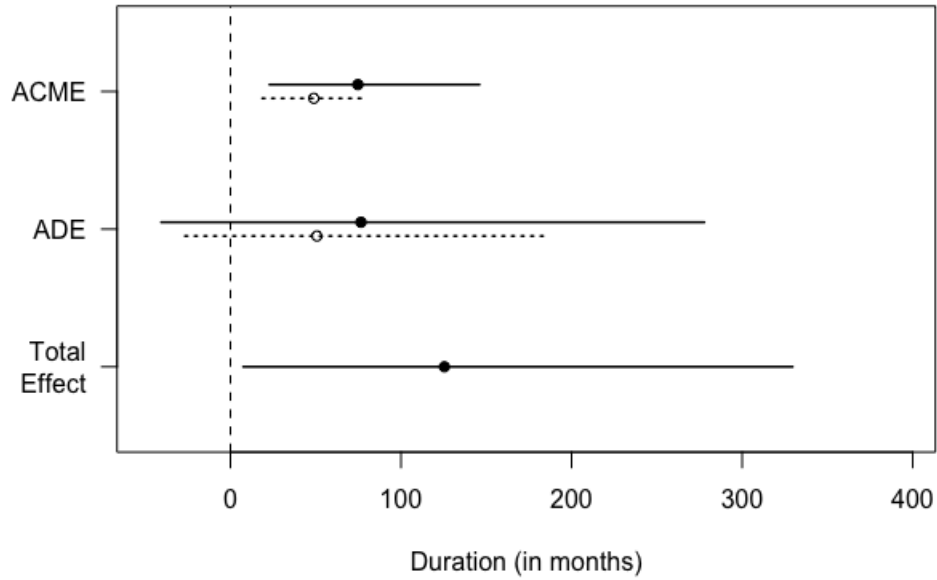
Table 2: Durability of Coup Regimes (Weibull model)

	<i>DV: Regime duration (in months)</i>			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
elections		1.143*** (0.165)		1.390*** (0.168)
prev. democracy*	0.736* (0.429)	0.295 (0.391)	0.857** (0.432)	0.369 (0.376)
prev. military aid				
prev. democracy	−0.321 (0.345)	−0.064 (0.313)	−0.460 (0.360)	−0.191 (0.311)
prev. military aid	−0.358* (0.209)	−0.127 (0.192)	−0.469** (0.235)	−0.191 (0.206)
lost election			−0.799** (0.351)	−1.269*** (0.315)
GDP/capita			0.014 (0.227)	0.440** (0.195)
Δ GDP/capita			0.191 (0.231)	−0.091 (0.207)
prev. GDP/capita			0.050 (0.218)	−0.283 (0.191)
prev. Δ GDP/capita			−0.201 (0.200)	0.078 (0.181)
population			0.013 (0.081)	0.007 (0.075)
junior officer			0.294 (0.203)	0.309* (0.180)
post-1990			−0.028 (0.375)	0.200 (0.313)
oil exporter			0.166 (0.309)	0.040 (0.276)
pre-protests			−0.196 (0.225)	−0.312* (0.188)
Constant	4.622*** (0.162)	3.813*** (0.182)	4.292*** (1.233)	2.194* (1.147)
Observations	185	185	183	183
Log Likelihood	−974.119	−952.664	−963.710	−934.033
χ^2	4.393	47.303***	13.775	73.129***

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

Alternatively, Figure 3 presents the mediation analysis proposed by (Imai et al., 2010). The average causal mediated effect, or ACME, is significant ($p=0.01$) for both the treatment (solid line) and control (dashed line), suggesting that the effect of aid*democracy on duration is indeed mediated through elections. Moreover, the average direct effect (ADE) is not significant, suggesting that there may be no other effect of aid*democracy on duration except through an increased likelihood of holding elections. Substantively, the mediated effect is large: of the additional 125 months that coup leaders ousting democracies can expect to remain in office as the result of being tied to U.S. aid, about 49% (62 months) is the result of holding elections. This suggests that at least one reason that coup regimes ousting democracies tied to U.S. military aid last longer is because they hold elections.

Figure 3: Effect of Aid*Democracy on Duration Mediated Through Elections



One concern with this analysis is endogeneity: perhaps coup regimes that hold elections do not last longer, but rather coup regimes that last longer are able to hold elections. To gain some leverage over this possibility, Table 13 (Appendix) experiments with removing short-lived coup regimes that may not have had time to hold elections.

Results hold when excluding coup regimes that do not last 1 year, 2 years, 5 years, and even 10 years. After 10 years, the absence of an election almost certainly reflects lack of interest on the autocrat’s part, rather than insufficient time to organize an election. These results provide suggestive evidence that the causal arrow may be pointing from elections to increased regime longevity.

In sum, this cross-national analysis of coup regimes between 1946-2014 demonstrates that on average, coup leaders who overthrow democracies are less likely to hold elections, except when tied to U.S. military aid, with important implications for regime durability. The statistical analyses suggest that these effects hold across time and space and are robust to a variety of alternative specifications. While powerful, the cross-national analysis is unable to uncover why these effects occur. To trace the mechanisms that underlie these findings, we turn next to two case studies: the Nigerian coup of 1983 and the Egyptian coup of 2013.

Case Studies

The following cases are designed to illustrate the mechanisms at work. We have therefore selected ‘most likely’ cases for our theory, where the mechanisms will be clearest. Two considerations motivated this case selection. First, we chose cases with high values on our independent variables of interest, as these clear-cut cases should exhibit the mechanisms more cleanly than middling ones. Second, we selected two well-known and substantively important countries, where the cases would be accessible and of interest to the broadest range of readers.

With these two criteria in mind, we selected Nigeria 1983 and Egypt 2013. The first case is designed to show why coups overthrowing democracies are less likely to see elections. Nigeria was a fairly strong democracy prior to its 1983 coup, receiving a polity score of 7 and consistently coded as a democracy in the [Boix et al. \(2013\)](#), [Cheibub et al. \(2010\)](#), and [Geddes et al. \(2014\)](#) datasets. It is also the most populous country and largest economy in sub-Saharan Africa, has seen one of the highest numbers of

coups (6), and its politics are one of the most followed in the region (Briggs, 2017). In Nigeria, we show that the coup against democracy occurred because the population and military had become disillusioned with democracy, and as a result, there was neither public pressure nor motivation on the military’s part to hold elections.

In the second case study, the Egyptian coup of 2013, we show that coup leaders overthrowing democracies but tied to U.S. military aid face unique pressure to legitimate their coups to the U.S. by presenting a democratic façade. Egypt is the highest recipient of U.S. military aid in our dataset, receiving \$1.3 billion each year, and accordingly should be where the mechanism is clearest. Egypt is also the most populous country in the Middle East, a bellwether for political events in the region (Blaydes, 2011), and home to the largest military in the Arab world.

Case Study 1: Nigeria 1983

Nigeria has had a long history of military engagement with politics, with the military ruling the state directly for much of the period between 1966 and 1999. However, Nigeria did enjoy a brief period of civilian rule between 1979 and 1983, under the elected government of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) and President Shehu Shagari. But this brief experiment with democratic rule came to an end with a military coup on December 31, 1983.

As with many failed democratic transitions, President Shagari’s administration had coincided with “the most serious economic crisis in twenty years” (Ekwe-Ekwe, 1985, p. 613). With oil revenues dropping, food prices rising, and industrial production nearly coming to a halt, Nigerians had become increasingly disillusioned with democracy, especially as politicians became embroiled in corruption (Siollun, 2013). In his first address after assuming power, Major General Muhammadu Buhari justified the coup on the grounds that it was “necessary in order to put an end to the serious economic predicament and the crisis of confidence now afflicting [Nigeria]” (Buhari, 1984).

The growing public antipathy towards the democratically elected government had peaked with the election of 1983, which returned Shagari and the NPN to power but

which was widely seen as rigged by the ruling party. Protests erupted in various parts of the country against the results of the election (Apter, 1987). Between the economic crisis and the political crisis of the election, the legitimacy of the democratic order had been considerably shaken. At the time it was not uncommon to hear statements like “the worst military dictatorship is better than this democratic government” (Siollun, 2013). According to Larry Diamond: “A large proportion of the Nigerian electorate had come to favor the latter option [military rule]. My own pre-election survey in Kano state, the largest and most politically volatile in the country, showed a majority of the state’s electorate and two-thirds of voters in the city of Kano favoring a military government” (Diamond, 1984).

Thus, widespread disillusionment with democracy had made the conditions ripe for a military coup. Indeed, the military chose to wait until disillusionment set in before intervening. Coup-plotter Major General Ibrahim Babangida noted that: “We could have toppled that government in 1982, before the [1983] elections. But then, we said no, because the people might go against us. [...] We waited for the right time. You see, to stage a coup, there is one basic element that everybody looks for; there must be frustration in the society. [...] We found the coup easier when there was frustration in the land” (Siollun, 2013).

The military had also grown disillusioned with democracy. The civilian President Shagari had clashed with the military on issues of national security and foreign policy. When Chadian forces invaded Nigeria in 1983, for instance, General Buhari crossed into Chadian territory despite President Shagari’s order to withdraw. No longer trusting civilians to make competent national security decisions, the military awaited an opportunity to regain power.

The military takeover was greeted with jubilation, and civilians even converged on the Nigerian border to prevent corrupt politicians from fleeing the country (Siollun, 2013). Upon assuming power, Buhari and his associates established a Federal Military Government and promised a relentless fight against corruption. Given the popular support for the end of the Shagari government, and for an accountability drive against

political corruption, there was little public pressure for elections or a quick return to democracy. Further there was little international pressure from the United States pushing the new regime towards seeking electoral legitimacy, given the absence of any military ties between the two states at the time. Therefore, in setting out his agenda Buhari declared that “the economy will be given a new impetus and a better direction” and “corrupt officials and their agents will be brought to book” (Buhari, 1984). Instead of committing to any path to a return to electoral rule, he chose to legitimate his rule through Buharism, a fascist and nationalist ideology designed to move the economy away from the ‘parasitic’ control of elites and into the hands of the emerging ‘productive’ classes. Instead of seeking electoral legitimacy, Buhari focused on the fight against political corruption, detaining hundreds of politicians and trying them before military courts, rounding up the leadership of the NPN and other political parties, and attempting to reform society through his War Against Indiscipline.

Thus in the Nigerian coup of 1983, disagreements over national security decision-making provided the motive for the military to intervene, while public disillusionment with democracy provided the opportunity. With little domestic – or international – pressure for elections, and no personal inclination, the new coup regime made no moves towards electoral legitimacy. Yet without elections, Buhari’s coup regime proved brittle, falling to another military coup just 20 months later.

Case Study 2: Egypt 2013

To demonstrate how international ties can pressure coup leaders to hold elections, our second case study is Egypt. An examination of the 2013 Egyptian coup presents a insightful look into how both sides of the aid relationship jointly navigate the post-coup pressures to justify a seizure of power, on the one hand, and the continuance of aid, on another.

Since the Free Officers’ coup in 1952, the military has enjoyed a dominant position in Egyptian politics, for decades “ruling but not governing” from behind the scenes (Cook, 2007). After a popular revolution in 2011, the Supreme Council of the

Armed Forces (SCAF) assumed a direct role in managing the country and the popular demands for a transition to democracy. Relatively free and fair parliamentary and presidential elections in 2011 and 2012 brought to power the Muslim Brotherhood, which after a brief period of rapprochement with the military turned towards an at times “confrontational approach,”²⁰ denying the officers important economic contracts and deviating from their national security preferences (Marshall, 2015; Grewal, 2015; Nassif, 2017). The Egyptian public had also turned against the Muslim Brotherhood and the Brotherhood-affiliated President Mohamed Morsi, with opinion polls pegging their approval rating at no more than 30% by June 2013. Moreover, according to the Arab Barometer, support for democracy had fallen from about 70% in 2011 to less than 40% in 2013 (Grewal, 2015). The military thus had both the institutional grievances and the domestic opportunity to oust President Morsi.

But for Defense Minister and commander-in-chief Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, there was one additional factor to consider before carrying out a coup: the United States. Since signing the peace treaty with Israel in 1978, Egypt has been the recipient of an average of \$1.3 billion in military aid each year, second only to Israel. In 2013, U.S. military aid represented nearly 22% of the Egyptian military’s \$5.85 billion budget.²¹ The Egyptian military is also heavily dependent more generally on warm military-to-military relations with the U.S., as Egypt’s almost exclusively American-built jets, tanks, and communications systems depend on the U.S. for continual repairs and spare parts. Defense Minister Sisi thus had to ensure that U.S. military aid would not be suspended if he removed the democratically elected president.

Before and after his coup, Sisi pursued a variety of strategies to legitimate his actions to the Americans. First, the military helped fund and engineer a massive

²⁰ Author’s interview with Muslim Brotherhood leader Abdullah El Haddad, London, July 14, 2015.

²¹ Budget data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)’s Military Expenditure Database. This \$5.85 billion figure includes both \$4.55 billion in domestic expenditure and the \$1.3 billion in U.S. military aid.

protest movement, Tamarod, to publicly call on the officers to oust Morsi ([Frankel and Atef, 2014](#)). When Tamarod's demonstrations began on June 30, 2013, Sisi was able to more credibly claim to the U.S. that his July 3 coup was not actually a coup but instead a popular revolution, and that the army was simply responding to the will of the people. To further cement this image, Sisi, when publicly announcing his removal of President Morsi, was flanked by representatives of the major opposition parties, religious institutions, and each of Egypt's major state apparatuses. He appointed a civilian, the chief justice of the Supreme Court, as a figurehead president to give the aura of civilian rule, and most importantly, announced a roadmap to democracy, including amending the constitution and holding new presidential and parliamentary elections ([Ahram Online, 2013](#)).

In a statement hours after the coup, U.S. President Barack Obama expressed his "deep concern" over the army's decision to remove Morsi, but stopped short of labeling the army's actions as a coup, a determination that would have mandated an aid suspension. Obama and the majority of his cabinet wanted to maintain relations with Egypt, preferring security and stability, and moreover saw the coup as a *fait accompli* that an aid suspension would not alter.²² At the same time, Obama needed to pressure Sisi to at least present a façade of democracy so that the U.S. government would have an easier time maintaining military aid in the face of growing Congressional opposition and civil society outcry. Obama thus publicly ordered a review of aid to Egypt "in light of today's developments" and "call[ed] on the Egyptian military to move quickly and responsibly to return full authority back to a democratically elected civilian government as soon as possible through an inclusive and transparent process" ([Obama, 2013](#)).

The coming weeks saw a heated debate in the halls of the U.S. Congress, with prominent Senators John McCain, Lindsey Graham and Patrick Leahy calling the act a coup and demanding an aid suspension. The administration, however, stuck to its guns. On July 26, the State Department spokeswoman, Jen Psaki, announced that the

²² Interview with former Obama administration official, Washington, D.C., July 27, 2017.

administration had decided not to decide whether the events constituted a coup (Psaki, 2013a). Secretary of State John Kerry went further on August 1, echoing the Egyptian military's narrative in saying that "the military was asked to intervene by millions and millions of people" and that the military was in fact "restoring democracy" (Gordon and Fahim, 2013).

After the Egyptian military's massacres of anti-coup protesters in Rabaa and Nahda squares on August 14, pressure from Congress and civil society grew unbearable. While still refusing to make a determination over whether the events constituted a coup, the Obama administration on October 9 partially suspended aid to Egypt "pending credible progress toward an inclusive, democratically elected civilian government through free and fair elections" (Psaki, 2013b). Yet alongside this strongly worded public statement suggesting Egypt needed to make major reforms, the U.S. sent Secretary Kerry to Egypt to deliver the opposite message: that Egypt's "roadmap [to democracy] is being carried out to the best of our perception. There are questions we have here and there about one thing or another, [but] it's important for all of us, until proven otherwise, to accept that this is the track Egypt is on and to work to help it to be able to achieve that" (Gordon, 2013). In private meetings with Egypt's leaders, a State Department official noted that Kerry "said several times, 'You have to help us help you'" (Gordon, 2013).

The message was clear: Egypt would not need to make genuine progress toward democracy, but would simply need to continue on its path to a democratic façade through a new constitution and elections before aid could be restored. That Cairo had received this message was also clear from its response to the aid cut. Instead of releasing Morsi or loosening human rights restrictions, Egypt realized that its primary challenge lay in convincing Congress to allow a resumption of aid. Egypt's response to the aid cut was thus the hiring of one of D.C.'s top lobbyists, the Glover Park Group, to improve its image in Washington (Bogardus, 2013).

Over the next year, Egypt's coup leaders made little effort to improve their human rights records or pursue genuine political reforms. Instead, General Sisi pushed

through a new constitution strengthening the institutional privileges of the military by, among other clauses, limiting parliamentary oversight of the military’s budget to the heads of two parliamentary committees and granting the military a veto over of the choice of Defense Minister for the next eight years. In January 2014, the constitution passed with 98.1% of the vote in a referendum criticized by election monitor Democracy International as occurring during “a restrictive political climate [and...] taking place against a backdrop of arrests and detention of opposing voices” ([Democracy International, 2014](#)). Sisi – now promoted to Field Marshal – was then elected president in May 2014 with 96.9% of the vote in a presidential election similarly criticized by election observers for its “repressive political environment” ([Kirkpatrick, 2014b](#)).

Even though the new constitution and elections did not represent meaningful democratization, the restoration of aid only required a democratic façade. The ‘roadmap to democracy’ had been completed and critical Congressional voices had by now lost steam. The U.S. restored aid to Egypt in early 2015.

Conclusion

Autocrats who come to power through military coups face a uniquely acute legitimacy deficit: they must justify how they came to power in addition to the standard question of why they should rule. Coup leaders can pursue a variety of strategies to overcome this deficit, legitimating their coup through, among other means, a populist ideology, a technocratic focus on performance, or electoral claims to power. Why some coup leaders attempt to legitimate their coups through elections and others do not was the subject of our inquiry.

Drawing on a dataset of power-seeking coup regimes between 1946 and 2014, we find that coup leaders overthrowing democracies have been the least likely to hold elections, except when tied to U.S. military aid. As the case study of Nigeria illustrated, coups against democracies occur when the population and/or the military become disillusioned with democracy, both of which make post-coup elections unlikely. However,

as the case of Egypt made clear, when U.S. military aid is on the line, coup leaders overthrowing democracies may face unique pressure to present a democratic façade in order to maintain military aid. Such coup leaders therefore hold elections to help legitimate their coups to the West.

There are several consequences to pressuring coup leaders to hold elections. We find that coup regimes holding elections are significantly more durable, lasting on average an additional 5.3 years in power. In contrast to recent literature, we find that U.S. pressure to hold elections does not entail pressure to democratize; moreover, coup regimes were considerably more likely to hold sham elections than competitive ones. By extending the longevity of autocratic coup regimes, U.S. pressure to present democratic window dressing may even be detrimental to the broader cause. On the other hand, [Miller \(2015\)](#) finds that while autocratic elections may reduce the likelihood of democratization, conditional on a democratic transition, autocratic elections increase the likelihood of consolidation.

There may be other effects of pressure to hold elections beyond what has been examined here. If not for U.S. aid, coup leaders in previously democratic countries generally would not hold elections, as they fear the victory of the ousted party. Pressuring such leaders to hold elections may therefore require them to first repress supporters of that ousted party to ensure the coup regime’s victory at the polls. The Rabaa massacre and broader crackdown on supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt suggest the plausibility of this hypothesis; further research could more systematically analyze whether pressure to hold elections may perversely incentivize repression.²³

The U.S., of course, is not the only supplier of military aid. In future research, scholars could examine whether aid coming from other countries exhibits a similar effect on the choice of legitimation strategy. Coup leaders tied to the Soviet Union during the Cold War, for instance, may have been more likely to pursue populist or socialist ideologies in order legitimate their coups to the Soviet Union.

²³ [Derpanopolous et al. \(2016\)](#) find that levels of repression increase after coups, though this result has not yet been tied to elections.

While this piece was a first cut at the factors that affect a coup leader's choice of legitimating strategy, much work remains, particularly for explaining non-electoral legitimization strategies. Populist appeals may be more common in countries with greater inequality, for example. Militaries that had previously been marginalized may be sympathetic to similar accounts of marginalization among segments of the population and therefore be more radical or revolutionary in ideology. In short, we hope this piece is simply the tip of the iceberg in a broader research agenda exploring the factors affecting the legitimization strategies of coup leaders and autocrats more generally.

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