

Coup d'etat or Coup d'Autocracy?

How Coups Impact Democratization, 1950-2008

CLAYTON L. THYNE, PH.D.
Assistant Professor
University of Kentucky
Department of Political Science
1615 Patterson Office Tower
Lexington, KY 40506
(859) 257-6958 (phone)
(859) 257-7034 (fax)
clayton.thyne@uky.edu

JONATHAN M. POWELL
Graduate Student
University of Kentucky
1618 Patterson Office Tower
(859) 257-6958 (phone)
(859) 257-7034 (fax)
jonathan.powell@uky.edu

This paper considers how coups impact democratization. Current research focuses on coups as a threat to consolidated and fledgling democracies. Policy-makers have adapted to this viewpoint by treating coups as unjustifiable maneuvers that must be curtailed, with states frequently terminating aid and IOs suspending membership following a coup. While coups clearly confound democratic consolidation, it is notable that few coups happen within democracies. Therefore, we focus on how coups impact the failure of authoritarian regimes. We first argue that successful coups should promote democratization because leaders have incentives to democratize quickly in order to establish political legitimacy and economic growth. Second, we argue that a failed coup attempts are credible signals that leaders must enact meaningful reforms to remain in power. Empirical analyses predicting authoritarian failures strongly support the argument that coups promote democratization. Results are particularly strong for the states that are least likely to democratize otherwise.

It was just after midnight in the early morning of April 25, 1974 when “Grandola, Vila Morena” came over the radio in the Portuguese capital of Lisbon. A casual listener may have simply laid back and enjoyed the song. A more politically astute observer might have found the Portuguese Catholic radio station’s broadcast somewhat puzzling, given the ode’s communist-leading themes had gotten in banned from the airwaves throughout Portugal. It was with a select number of military officers, however, that would take the most interest in the sounds of Zeca Afonso’s tune about brotherhood in the Vila Morena. At 12:25, these officers took their cue. Fifty miles north of the city, ten armored vehicles promptly readied themselves at the Santarem Calvary School. Within a few hours they would be quickly moving toward the capital, where they occupied the Plaza of Commerce by sunrise. By midday, it was clear that “the will to resist a coup did not exist” (Maxwell 1995:58) and with minimal resistance, a coup d’etat had “brought down Europe’s oldest dictatorship...its oldest empire” (Harvey 1978:19).

While the April 1974 putsch allowed Europe’s oldest dictatorship to make a transition to democracy in only three years—even ushering in democracy’s “third wave”—the vast majority of scholars and policy-makers have come to view coups as antithetical to democracy. Huntington (1991:2-4) described the aftermath of the coup as both implausible and unwitting—the former because coups are seldom regarded as ushering in democracy in a country, and the latter because democratization was not even a specific goal of the coup makers. Policy-makers have been quick to adapt to the viewpoint that coups are unjustifiable, undemocratic maneuvers that must be curtailed. For example, current US policy mandates the suspension of aid in the event of a coup, ranging from military assistance programs to the Peace Corps.¹ Similar policies have been adopted by international organizations like the Organization of American States (OAS) and the African Union (AU), which possess mechanisms to allow a speedy suspension of members that have undergone a coup. Following the overthrow of Honduran President Zayala in 2009, for example, Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez threatened an invasion if the ousted leader was not reinstated, while U.S. president Barack Obama asked the coup leaders to “respect democratic norms, the rule of law, and the tenets of the Inter-American Democratic Charter,” which would include allowing the president to return to office (Malkin 2009). The OAS immediately announced

it would refuse to recognize a regime headed by anyone other than Zelaya, and within a week the regional governing body voted unanimously to suspend Honduras (Malkin 2009; Thompson and Lacey 2009a). Such policies are now commonplace among both states and international organizations. Given that the coup in Venezuela was only one of 455 coup attempts since 1950, it is absolutely necessary that these policies are founded on strong theoretical and empirical grounds (Powell and Thyne 2011).

While these policies confront the fact that coups are a major threat to fledgling democracies, blanket responses such as those levied against Honduras discount any possibility that a coup might actually promote democratization. This is surprising given that few coups happen within democracies, giving most coup leaders little democracy to undermine. Paul Collier (2008, 2009) recently mounted a counter-charge to the blanket policies of condemning coups, noting that coups are often the best approach to removing dictators.² Few among the pro-democracy crowd would lament the overthrow of Zimbabwean President Mugabe or Burmese General Shwe, he argues, and one might wonder if the world would be better off had Idi Amin or Saddam Hussein been ousted early in their tenure. Even Zayala's anti-democratic maneuvers provide credibility to the coup leaders' claims that their moves were meant to protect democracy (Strange 2009). At the very least, this debate suggests a need for a careful and systematic analysis of the impact of coups on democratization, which is the purpose of this paper.

In the following pages, we focus on authoritarian regimes in an attempt to clarify the role that coups play in the promotion or prevention of democracy. We begin with a discussion of how policy-makers have worked to coup-proof the world within their individual foreign policy and regional institutions, which sets the stage for our attempt to generate policy-relevant advice. Next, we articulate a theory to explain how coups affect authoritarian failure. While we wholeheartedly agree with claims that coups are bad for democracies (Onwumehili 1998; Kieh and Agbese 2005), the fact that few coups happen within democracies leads us to argue against the blanket policies of condemning coups in order to promote democratization. Instead, we first explain that successful coups are likely to promote democratization within authoritarian regimes because coups are most likely to arise under staunch authoritarianism, and that coup leaders have strong incentives to promote democratization to improve the

economic and political stability of the state. Second, we contend that even failed coups are likely to lead to democratization because they represent clear, credible signals that the leader must enact meaningful reforms to stay in power. The theory is followed by empirical tests examining how coups impact the likelihood of democratic transitions within authoritarian regimes from 1950 to 2008, which provides strong support for our theory. We extend the analyses by examining which authoritarian states are most likely to democratize following a successful coup, focusing specifically on pre-coup polity levels and the executive's tenure. In the absence of coups, we find that both strongly authoritarian leaders and leaders who have maintained power for a long period of time are the least likely to democratize, which is unsurprising. These same states, however, become the most likely to democratize when their leader is challenged with a coup. Thus, not only do coups lead to authoritarian failure in a general sense, but they also seem to be most effective in removing the leaders who are least likely to democratize. We conclude by summarizing our study and urging policy-makers to reconsider their blanket response to condemning coups.

COUPS AND DEMOCRATIC NORMS: GOOD INTENTIONS, QUESTIONABLE POLICY

The end of the Cold War brought an optimistic view that democracy was the sole legitimate form of governance and that it would quickly spread throughout the world (Fukuyama 1992). While Fukuyama's view may have been overly optimistic, a number of international actors have given increased attention to promoting or protecting democratic governance. The United States, for example, has since 1993 forbade U.S. funds from being "expended to finance directly any assistance to any country whose duly elected Head of Government is deposed by military coup or decree".³ Events in Haiti following Jean-Bertrand Aristide's ouster witnessed the United States go beyond merely cutting off aid, as they led an OAS effort to internationally isolate Haiti, eventually even committing 20 thousand soldiers to ensuring the return of President Aristide. States retain similar anti-coup policies throughout the world.

Beyond the policies of individual states, the international response to coups has become all-but automated in a culmination of a variety of international agreements. Though the OAS charter contained numerous references to the indispensability of representative democracy, a democratic norm for the

region was largely lost in the midst of the Cold War. An increased fervor, however, was introduced in 1991 when the regional body passed Resolution 1080, which included a promise to “promote and consolidate” representative democracy. The secretary-general was to convene a meeting following an irregular interruption of power, during which the offending regime could be suspended with a two-thirds vote from other members. The anti-coup stance was further bolstered in 2001 with the passage of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, which pledged to respond to any “unconstitutional interruption of the democratic order or an unconstitutional alteration of the constitutional regime” of a member state. The unified response to General Cedras’s ousting of Aristide illustrated both the international will and ability to restore a fallen leader.

A similar trajectory can be seen in the African Union. After decades of adherence to the principle of non-intervention, African states in the 1990s began taking a more pro-active approach in deterring coups. The 1997 African Unity Summit in Harare saw the passage of a resolution condemning coups, followed by the 1999 Algiers declaration that aimed to ban any leaders who had taken power via a coup since the last meeting or had not held credible elections. However, the organization was faced with the overthrow of Henrie Konan Bedie of the Cote d’Ivoire just months after the Algiers Declaration. Rather than following through on its commitments, the organization followed through on no punitive measures, even allowing new head of state General Robert Guei to attend the next annual summit (Kieh and Agbese 2004:10-11). The following meeting in Lome saw the creation of a more formal anti-coup framework, as any coup-born regime would automatically “not be allowed to participate in the activities of the Union” (Piccone 2004:25). This was once again strengthened with the abandoning of the OAU’s non-interventionist policy, when at the launching of the African Union in 2002 the organization dedicated itself to “immediately and publicly” condemning coups, and imposing sanctions in the case of “resistance” (Ould-Abdallah 2006:23).

While the anti-coup policies among a variety of states and IOs is clear, the descriptive statistics on past coups call into question the most basic assumption upon which the policies are founded—the assumption that coups lead to the downfall of pro-democratic regimes. In Figure 1, we present

histograms of the Polity IV scores for all states that have experienced either a failed or successful coup. For the entire sample, we see that only 16.9% of coups happen within regimes scored above +5, which is a common threshold for defining democracy. In fact, the plurality of coups happens in the staunchly authoritarian states coded below -5 (44.2%). While the spread becomes a bit more even following the institution of anti-coup policies around 1990, in Figure 1b we continue to see that the vast majority of coups happen within authoritarian regimes. Thus, while some coups have the potential to topple democratic regimes, coups as threats to regime survival are far more of a consideration for authoritarian regimes. This will come as no surprise to many, given a claimed coup-inhibiting impact of political liberalization (e.g., Lindberg and Clark 2008).

[Figure 1 here]

Beyond looking at the pre-coup situation, considering what happens in the post-coup political environment provides even more compelling evidence to call into question the anti-coup norm as a way to promote democracy. In Figure 2, we plot the average trajectory of democratization for all states that have experienced a coup attempt from 1950 to 2008.⁴ The results are striking. Successful coups lead to an initial authoritarian shift, but within a few years the polity score has recovered to the pre-coup levels, if not improved. More interestingly, failed coups actually seem to be a catalyst for moving toward democratization.

[Figure 2 here]

While the descriptive statistics presented here provide nothing conclusive, they provide at least some evidence pointing to a disconnect between policy and reality.⁵ Policy dictates that coups be automatically nipped in the bud in order to protect democracy, while reality indicates that coups rarely target democracies, and perhaps act as a catalyst for democratization. This disconnect has paramount real-world consequences. For example, the current response would have condemned the April 1974 Portuguese coup, with the regime considered illegitimate until the dictatorial Novo Estado was returned to power. It would have asked for the return of repressive dictators General Moussa Traoré in Mali, or the

Central African Republic's Jean-Bedel Bokassa. With these concerns in mind, we now turn to a discussion of how coups might promote democratization.

COUPS AND THE FAILURE OF AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

In order to understand how coups might lead to democratization, it is necessary to begin with a basic explanation of what coups are (and are not). Powell and Thyne (2011) draw on decades of research on this subject to provide a comprehensive discussion of this issue, focusing on several factors that define a coup. First, they argue that the target of a coup must be the chief executive, which precludes challenges to leadership that are not necessarily meant to change the regime (e.g., mutinies against military officers). Second, they claim that perpetrators of a coup must come from elites who are part of the state apparatus, the most common of which are military officers. This avoids conflating coups with revolutions, popular movements, civil wars, and foreign invasions, which provide an array of unique challenges to democratization. Third, the tactics must be illegal, which differentiates coups from political pressure that may force a leader to resign. In sum, the coup definition used in this paper includes “illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive” (Powell and Thyne 2011:5).

Beyond merely defining coups, it is necessary to outline the conditions that make a coup attempt most likely. Three conditions come to the forefront. First, coup plotters must predict that the post-coup environment will be preferable to the status quo. Given that the post-coup environment is exceedingly difficult to estimate, the bulk of this decision comes down to the status quo environment. Past research has found coups to be most likely when either the economy or regime legitimacy is in crisis. For instance, Johnson (1962: 260) explains that economic decline in Latin America was quick to “invite coups [with] popular approval,” which is supported by Galetovic and Sanhueza (2000), Londregan and Poole (1990), Janowitz (1977), Belkin and Schofer (2003), Johnson, Slater and McGowan (1984), and Thyne (2010). Likewise, widespread discontent over governmental legitimacy frequently precipitates coups, most often in the form of mass riots, protests, or strikes (Sutter 2000; Lindberg and Clark 2008). According to Sutter (1999:130), citizens can have a hand in inhibiting a coup's outcome by “credibly

refusing to support an illegitimate regime.” He goes on to liken a coup attempted in the face of public disapproval to seizing the bridge of a ship whose engines are inoperable. For example, a poll conducted by Rajabhat Suan Dusit University, shows 84% of Thai respondents favored the successful 2006 military coup in Thailand, which undoubtedly contributed to its success (Faiola 2006). This discontent is particularly frequent in military regimes due to their lack of legitimacy, popular support, and internal fractionalization (Geddes 1999).

Second, coup plotters must view an illegal overthrow of the government as the least costly option to improving the country. This decision is not taken lightly. Leaders are quick to purge military leadership after the discovery of a coup plot, and the consequences for perpetrating a failed coup attempt are most frequently death, but also include exile and imprisonment (Svolik 2009). For example, following his failed 1985 putsch against Liberian president Samuel Doe, Thomas Quiwonpka was “captured, tortured, castrated, dismembered and parts of his body publicly eaten by Doe’s victorious troops” (Hubband 1998:40). Doe was not content with merely punishing the instigator. His Executive Mansion Guard went on to round up members of the Gio and Mano ethnic groups, leading to a slaughter of up to 3000 people. Other group-level punishments can extend to the armed forces themselves. Costa Rica, for example, abolished its army following a coup attempt (Finer 2002), while Kenya dismissed virtually every Air Force officer following a failed attempt in 1982 (N’Diaye 2002). Additionally, we recall that coup perpetrators must come from either the military or other elites in the state apparatus. This represents a critical difference from coups and civil wars. Under the status quo, coup plotters often have a privileged status in society, whereas rebellions frequently arise among those who have little if anything to lose. Thus, leaders seeking a change to the regime are likely to exhaust all legal channels before perpetrating a coup, and are most likely to do so only when they expect their leadership to cause a significant improvement in society.

With these conditions in mind, we can begin to understand why coups would lead to a process of democratization. Regarding the first dimension—the status quo versus the post coup environment—we expect coups to only come about when the coup plotters plan on creating conditions of both economic

prosperity and political legitimacy. One way to achieve economic prosperity is by opening an economy to foreign aid, investment, and international business transactions. Previous work focusing on Latin America shows that coups become more likely as economic ties (e.g., declining aid flows and enforcement of sanctions) with the US sour (Thyne 2010), while global data suggests democracies are most likely to trade with other democracies (Mansfield, Milner, and Rosendorf 2000). Coup leaders are apt to make moves to open these channels and end harmful sanctions to jump start the economy following a coup. Given that aid flows and the removal of sanctions are frequently tied to democratization (Cox and Drury 2006), making moves towards democracy is an important way for coup leaders to improve economic conditions following a coup.

Regarding political legitimacy, we should expect coup leaders to begin building political legitimacy as quickly as possible after overthrowing the government. Doing otherwise places the coup-led government in peril of being overthrown themselves, especially given the cyclical nature of coups (Collier and Hoeffler 2005). Mali provides a telling example. Economic stagnation and poor living conditions had prompted a general strike and calls for the resignation of President Moussa Traoré. Rather than opening up the political process, the Traoré regime responded with repression, as subsequent clashes between demonstrators and state security forces culminated in 150 deaths in March 1991. It took the efforts of the military to change the course of Malian history, when soldiers led by Lieutenant Colonel Amadou Touré ousted the president (New York Times 1991a). A week later, the military appointed Soumana Sacko, a senior official from the UN Development Program, as interim Prime Minister and announced a national conference to draw up a new constitution (New York Times 1991b). These efforts are clear signals that military intervention was instrumental, if not necessary, in Mali's transition to democratic rule.

While some coup plotters make the choice to personalize the regime and consolidate power following a coup, most coup plotters (particularly among the military ranks) have little interest in running the country. In fact, Geddes (1999:123) explains that coup plotters frequently choose a leader "known for correctness, adherence to rules, fairness, lack of personal ambition, and low charisma, to lead the junta or

military command council.⁷⁶ Given their lack of ambition for continued rule, we should expect coup plotters to turn over leadership as soon as a legitimate government can be put in place. Niger tells us a story regarding potential penalties for attempting to personalize power. Colonel Ibrahim Mainassara Baré ousted President Mahamane Ousmane in a January 1996 coup and assured the public that civilian rule would be restored once the political and economic chaos that had gripped the nation subsided. Baré retreated, however, from this promise and won a rigged July 1996 election while consolidating the shift to a presidential regime. Baré's efforts were not appreciated by pro-democracy components of the armed forces, and he was eventually assassinated by members of his presidential guard during a coup in April 1999. The next nine months witnessed the restoration of the semi-presidential regime and successful presidential and legislative elections that brought a return to civilian rule (Davis and Kossomi 2001). Likewise, the 2005 Mauritanian coup saw the junta in their first week make a pledge to hold elections within two years, going one step further by barring members of the military from running for office (N'Diaye 2009). More recently, the 2009 Honduran coup was undertaken just months prior to already-planned national elections. The proximity of elections in this case was a factor for the coup plotters, as they calculated that they would only have to withstand international condemnation until the polls were completed (Thompson and Lacey 2009b). Installing a democratic system is the best mechanism available to coup leaders to install a government that will be viewed as legitimate by the population at large, and the best way to assure support for the new regime from abroad. This argument is supported by a plethora of research promoting the idea that democracies are viewed as more legitimate than their authoritarian counterparts among the home population (see Chu et al. 2008 for an excellent review) and less likely to experience either coups or civil wars (e.g., Lindberg and Clark 2008; Hegre et al. 2001). It also jibes well with research promoting the importance of entering the democratic community for the survivability of the regime (Kadera, Crescenzi and Shannon 2003; Pevehouse 2002; Dunning 2004). This discussion leads to the following hypothesis:

H1: Successful coups within authoritarian regimes should increase the likelihood of regime failure (i.e., democratization).

We also expected failed coups to increase the likelihood of democratization, though through a much different process than failed coups. As discussed above, a coup attempt is an extremely risky venture. Coups will only be undertaken when either the elites or the military see the current situation as extremely dire. Unlike rebellions and riots, which can be cast off by leaders as mere hooliganism, an attack from other leaders within the state serves as an important and credible signal that the situation must change drastically for the leader to retain his grip on power. Even as the leader declares victory for thwarting a coup attempt, he cannot be certain how many plotters continue to exist and whether their anti-regime fervor was emboldened or impaired by the attempted coup. This is particularly true given that surviving a coup does not change the underlying conditions that led to the coup in the first place. Moreover, a state's previous experience with coups is a major predictor of future activity. Belkin and Schofer (2003, 610) indicate that the substantive impact of failed coups is very similar to the impact of successful ones, suggesting that merely defeating an attempt does not guarantee stability. We can thus expect state leaders to quickly adjust to their new reality with meaningful reforms.

The key question is how the leader will reform the state to avoid further coup attempts. Two options are likely. First, the leader can use a variety of mechanisms to coup-proof his regime (Frazer 1994; N'Diaye 2000; Quinlivan 1999). Such efforts generally include dividing the military, purging officers, or strengthening paramilitary forces (Belkin and Schofer 2003). This approach presents two problems. First, moves to weaken the military are likely to draw a backlash, encouraging military leaders to redouble their efforts to oust the leader before his efforts to dilute the military take effect (Synder 1992; Svolik 2009). Second, while the leader may make himself less susceptible to coups, his moves are also likely to weaken the military's effectiveness, which provides an opening for both rebel groups and forces abroad.

History is replete with examples of leaders who have met disaster by taking the coup-proofing route. In terms of falling victim to coups, President Henri Konan Bédié was toppled by the Ivoirian military in December 1999 due in part to his efforts to purge the civil service and military of elements he deemed to be a threat to his rule (Toungara 2001). Other examples show vulnerability to other forms of

conflict. For example, Zairian President Mobutu isolated promotions in the military to those with “enthusiasm for the existing regime,” specifically those from the Ngbandi ethnic group, while seasoned officers of the “old oligarchy” were purged and often executed (Kisangani (2000:215). He also chose to keep his best soldiers in the capital regardless of the performance of the military against insurgents elsewhere in the country (David 1987). These coup-proofing moves clearly diminished the fighting capability of his forces as seen during skirmishes between 1977 and 1978, when the Zairian military was soundly humbled by former Katangan soldiers. In the context of international conflict, Ugandan President Idi Amin’s coup-proofing strategies of purging, appointing illiterate officers, and relying on mercenaries scuttled his military capabilities, leaving his regime virtually defenseless against an eventual Tanzanian invasion (Decalo 1990). Similar efforts in Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Iraq have hampered fighting effectiveness by giving coup-proofing paramilitary units a monopoly on forward military capability (Quinlivan 1999). These examples suggest that a leader’s decision to coup-proof following a failed coup is likely to both draw the ire of the regular military and make the leader more susceptible to both wide-scale rebellions and attacks from other states.

Given the many problems with coup-proofing, we expect leaders who recently survived a coup attempt to take a second route to avoiding coup attempts in the future—removing the underlying conditions that precipitated the coup. Akin to our argument for successful coups, leaders should realize that their best path to continued survival includes strengthening the economy, establishing political legitimacy, and improving relations with the outside world. Each of these is best achieved by opening the political process to the population. We see this pattern played out in many coups over the last decade. In the Zambian case, Phiri (2003) has noted that a 1980 coup attempt and a plot in 1988 were undertaken with the participation and influence of civilians who were disillusioned with President Kaunda’s handling of the economy. Following yet another failed military coup attempt in June 1990, Zambians celebrated in the streets when for a period they believed that Kaunda—one of the longest tenured leaders in Africa—had been toppled (Perlez 1990). Though the attempt at his ouster ultimately failed, the actions of his military and the reaction of the public was a clear signal. Unable to improve the economy, and failing to

effectively coup-proof, Kaunda had exhausted his options. Shortly after the attempted 1990 putsch he allowed multiparty elections, where the 27 year reign of his United National Independence Party would lose in an October 1991 electoral landslide. This discussion leads to our second hypothesis:

H2: Failed coups within authoritarian regimes should increase the likelihood of regime failure (i.e., democratization).

Having laid out our primary theory, we now move to an empirical test of our hypotheses. We begin with a discussion of our model, proceed to empirical tests, and then extend the analyses by considering the conditions under which coups are most likely to lead to democratization.

DATA, METHODS AND MEASUREMENT

Our theory predicts that authoritarian regimes are more likely to transition to democracy following both successful (H1) and failed coups (H2) than authoritarian states that do not experience coups. Our unit of analysis to test these hypotheses is country-year for all authoritarian states from 1950 to 2008. We define a state as authoritarian if it is coded below +6 on the Polity IV index. This includes 170 authoritarian spells, 93 of which failed prior to the end of our time period. The remaining cases are censored in 2008. States are permitted to re-enter the sample after democratization if they lapse back into authoritarianism. For example, Haiti initially appears from 1950 to 1990, and then re-enters from 1991 to 1994 and from 2000 to 2008. We control for re-entry in our empirical model with a control variable for “past democratization” (explained below). Our dependent variable, authoritarian failure, is coded 1 in the year in which the state was coded +6 or greater on the Polity IV index.⁷ We use logistic regression to test our hypotheses, while controlling for authoritarian years and cubic splines for temporal dependence (Beck, Katz and Tucker 1998). Robust standard errors are clustered by subject.⁸ With this set-up, positive coefficients indicate an increase in the likelihood of authoritarian failure (i.e., democratization), while negative coefficients suggests continuation of authoritarianism.

Independent Variables

We include two dichotomous independent variables to test our hypotheses: *Recent failed coups* and *Recent successful coups*. Both of these measures begin with Powell and Thyne’s (2011) coup dataset.

As discussed earlier, these authors re-evaluate coup events reported in over a dozen earlier scholarly works as well as numerous media outlets to code all coup events from 1950 to 2010. Given that our unit of analysis is yearly for authoritarian states, we eliminate coups in democratic regimes and collapse country-years with multiple coups into a single yearly value. This includes 340 coup attempts, 190 of which were successful.⁹ We also do not expect coups to cause a change in democratic levels overnight. Leaders who survive a coup attempt need time to react to their new, precarious reality, just as leaders of a failed coup need time to establish order and begin a path towards either coup-proofing or transitioning to democracy. Thus, we code coup events as 1 for the year of the event and two years following the event.¹⁰ Our final measures include 457 (9.7%) observations as recently successful coups, and 406 (8.6%) observations as recently failed coups. We expect these measures to yield positive and significant coefficients, which would indicate an increase in the likelihood of authoritarian failure.

Control Variables

Studying the predictors of democratization is certainly not a new enterprise. Among the dozens of variables that have been found to have a significant impact on democratization in past studies, our final model includes measures that we found to have the most consistent and substantively significant impact on our dependent variable.¹¹ Our first set of measures attempt to capture historical conditions that are likely to make a state transition to democracy. The first measure, *Previous democracy*, is coded 1 if the state had any experience with democracy since 1800 (the beginning of the Polity dataset), which includes around 36% of the sample. Based on previous work, we expect states with a history of democracy to be more apt to transition to democracy in each time period (e.g., Huntington 1991). Previous work has also suggested that states colonized by the United Kingdom have had an easier path to democratization (Lipset et al. 1993; Lipset 1994; Weiner 1987). Thus, we next include a dummy variable, *Former British colony*, coded 1 if the state was a colony of the United Kingdom (Fearon and Laitin 2003). Around 27.9% of observations were former British colonies. The third variable, *Year of independence*, is the year that the country became independent (or 1800 if earlier than 1800). We expect fledgling states to be less apt to transition to democracy as leaders attempt to consolidate control of the regime. The variable has a mean

of 1917 (SD=61.3). Our next control variable, *Cold War*, attempts to control for the rivalry between the US and USSR in which many regimes were supported under one or the other's sphere of influence (e.g., support of Leftist-authoritarian like Castro's Cuba from the USSR and Rightist-authoritarian states like Pinochet's Chile from the US). This measure also captures years prior to the establishment of anti-coup regulations among states and IOs. This variable is coded 1 for years prior to 1989 (67.8% of the sample). We expect transitions to democracy to be less likely during the Cold War period. Our final measures attempt to capture the internal characteristics that might push for democratization. Most important among these is wealth, measured as *GDP/capita* (ln) from Gleditsch (2002) with updates from the World Bank's WDI dataset (2010). Wealth has been found to lead to democratic consolidation (Przeworski and Limongi 1997) and democratic transitions (Burkhart and Lewis-Beck 1994; Feng and Zak 1999). We also control for yearly changes in wealth, *Ch. GDP/capita*, which is measured as the percent change in GDP/capita from the previous year.

PRELIMINARY ANALYSES

We present our preliminary analyses in Table 1. The first model tests H1, which predicts that successful coups should increase the likelihood of authoritarian failure. This hypothesis receives strong support with a positive and significant coefficient ($p < .028$). The second hypothesis is likewise supported in Model 2, which shows that authoritarian failure is more likely following a failed coup ($p < .044$). Both successful and failed coups are brought together in Model 3, which provides continued support for our expectations ($p < .016$).¹²

[Table 1 here]

Beyond statistical significance, we can gauge the impact of the independent variables by calculating each variable's marginal effect on the dependent variable. The *Clarify* program was used to estimate predicted values for the significant variables in Table 1 (King, Tomz and Wittenberg, 2000; Tomz, Wittenberg and King, 2003). The results for these calculations are presented on the right side of Table 1, and graphically in Figure 3. Figure 3 displays how we should expect the likelihood of authoritarian failure to vary when each independent variable is allowed to vary from its 25th to 75th

percentile for continuous variables and from 0 to 1 for dichotomous variables while holding all other variables constant (means and modes).

[Figure 3 here]

We first see that the variables capturing coup attempts, whether successful or failure, provide substantial leverage in our ability to predict authoritarian failure. In the absence of coups, the likelihood of authoritarian failure is around .0048.¹³ This jumps to around .0098 following a successful coup, which represents around a 102.5 percent increase in the likelihood of democratization. The impact for failed coups is nearly as large, raising the likelihood of authoritarian failure by 97.4% (.0049 to .0098). We see a similar substantive effect when we disregard the outcome of the coup in Model 3, with all attempts increasing the likelihood of regime change by around 93% (.0046 to .0090). Overall, these results provide strong support for both of the hypotheses presented in the paper.

Regarding the control variables, we see results that are generally consistent with previous work and our theoretical expectations. Having a previous experience with democracy increases the likelihood of authoritarian failure by around 162 percent (.0046 to .0122), which represents the largest substantive impact of any of the variables in our model. This concurs with previous work on this relationship (Huntington 1991; Epstein et al 2006). The measure capturing the youthfulness of a state, *Year of Independence*, likewise behaves as expected. Showing the difficulties fledgling states have in making transitions to democracy, we see that states are around 57% (.0077 to .0033) less likely to democratize as this measure varies from its 25th to 75th percentile (1859 to 1960). Consistent with previous work on the impact of Cold War rivalries, we find that states are around 80% (.0232 to .0047) less likely to democratize from 1950 to 1989. Finally, our results for GDP/capita provide additional evidence linking wealth with democracy, which appears to be the most consistent finding in the democratization literature. A move from the 25th to 75th percentile (2.67 to 3.39, *ln* values) in this measure increases the likelihood of authoritarian failure by around 54 percent (.0038 to .0058). Somewhat surprisingly, we find no support for the notion that former British colonies are more likely to democratize. This is likely because many former British colonies democratized prior to 1950, which left them out of our dataset. We also find

insignificant findings for our measure meant to capture yearly changes in state wealth, which indicates that aggregate levels of wealth are a stronger factor pushing democratization than quick changes over time.

ROBUSTNESS AND EXTENSIONS

While the preliminary analyses provide strong support for our hypotheses, the results can be explored in many additional ways to further understand the types of states that democratize following coups and to assure the robustness of our findings. As it currently stands, the implications of our findings for policy-makers would be to support (or perhaps even try to foment) coups in authoritarian states. Our goal in this section is to provide a better understanding of when and where coups are most likely to have the greatest impact on democratization. Three concerns guide these efforts. First, to this point we have consolidated all authoritarian states together in a single group. This does not reflect the reality of authoritarianism, where we see some states on the verge of democracy (e.g., Mexico, 1995-97), and others that are appreciably more repressive (e.g., Saudi Arabia, 1950-08). Grouping all authoritarian states into a single category might also reveal spuriousness in our previous findings if coups are more likely in states that would have likely democratized anyway. Second, we are interested further exploring Collier's assertion that coups may be a particularly useful way to overthrow long-standing leaders who have few incentives to democratize. The policy advice becomes much more relevant if coups generate democratization when few alternative paths to regime change exist. Finally, we are interested in whether coup-generated democracies are as long-lived as democracies that come about through other processes. If the democratic bump following a coup is significantly short-lived versus democracies that develop through other processes, then our advice to support coups should surely be tempered.

We begin with the first concern, which deals with variation among authoritarian regimes. Conventional wisdom suggests that those states closest to democracy would be most likely to democratize in the following year. Descriptive statistics presented in the form of histograms in Figure 4 support this notion. The first row in this figure plots the Polity levels of states that democratized from 1950 to 2008 in the year prior to democratization. Figure 4a presents the 70 instances of democratization in the absence

of coups, showing that almost one-third (31.4%) of states that democratize are just below the democracy threshold (+5) in the year prior to democratization, over three-quarters (75.7%) of states are in the semi-authoritarian category (between -5 and +5), and only 2 states coded below -7 democratized in the following year. A much different story arises when we consider states that democratized following either failed or successful coups in Figures 4b and 4c, respectively. The bulk of states that democratized following either a failed (84.6%) or a successful coup (66.7%) come from the staunchly authoritarian category (-6 or below on the Polity index), while few come from the states that were likely to democratize anyway (i.e., those near the democratic threshold). Taken together, Figures 4a-4c suggests that democratization in the absence of coups is most likely to come from states that are already on the verge of democracy, while democratization in the presence of coups are most likely among solidly authoritarian regimes.

[Figure 4 here]

The second row of Figure 4 presents histograms of the duration that the executive has been in office prior to democratization.¹⁴ We might expect leaders who have become entrenched in office to be the least likely to reform vis-à-vis leaders who have recently come to power. This expectation is supported in Figure 4d. Among the 70 states that democratized in the absence of coups, 77.6% came from leaders who had been in office for less than 10 years, while only 6.9% came from leaders who had been in office more than 20 years. We see important differences when looking at states that democratized following coups. Among those that democratized following coups, a smaller or equal percentage came from leaders who had been in office for less than 10 years (50% for failed coups in Figure 4e; 77.6% for successful coups in Figure 4f). More importantly, a much larger percent came from leaders who had held office for more than 20 years (30.0% for failed coups; 11.1% for successful coups). Taken together, Figures 4d-4f suggest that coups are most likely to promote democratization when they come against leaders who are strongly entrenched in office.

Though the descriptive statistics provide support for the notion that coups promote democratization particularly among those who are least likely to democratize, a more sophisticated

approach is to analyze these relationships when controlling for other potential explanations. Brambor, Clark and Golder (2006) explain that interactive terms are the best way to test conditional hypotheses where the effect of one variable X (coups) depends on the value of one or more other variables Z (pre-coup polity levels and executive tenure). If the conclusions from the descriptive statistics hold, we should expect interactions between coups and pre-coup polity levels to show that coups are most likely to lead to democratization among staunchly authoritarian regimes, while the interaction between coups and executive tenure should show that coups are most effective in promoting democratization when they are launched against leaders who have remained in office for a long period of time.

We present the results for the conditional effects in Table 2. In columns 1 and 3 we present models without the interaction terms to assure that our results are consistent with the implications from Figures 4a and 4d (descriptive statistics among states without coups). As expected, higher levels of *Pre-coup polity* in Model 1 increase the likelihood of democratization. Likewise, the negative and significant coefficient for *Tenure of chief executive* in Model 3 suggests that authoritarian leaders who have held office for an extended period are unlikely to give voice to the people. Regarding the conditional effects, we find robust support for the expectations outlined above. The negative and significant coefficient for the interaction term in Model 2 suggests that the impact of coups on democratization is strongest among staunchly authoritarian regimes, and diminishes as polity levels increase. Meanwhile, the positive and significant interaction term in Model 3 indicates that coups have the strongest impact on promoting democratization when they challenge leaders who have been in office for a long period.

[Table 2 here]

While the coefficients on the interaction terms provide evidence supporting our expectations, Brambor, Clark and Golder (2006) explain that interactive effects are best analyzed by plotting the marginal effect of the primary independent variables versus the conditional variables while holding control variables constant. We follow this advice by presenting the findings from Table 2 in Figure 5 using Boehmke's (2006) *grinter* data utility. Figure 5a presents the impact of coups on democratization across the range of pre-coup Polity levels from Model 2. We see here that the impact of coups on

democratization is strongest among the staunchly authoritarian regimes, and decreases as democracy levels grow. The impact becomes insignificant (i.e., the confidence interval includes zero) at around -2.5, and then becomes significant again at around +4. The kernel density plot plotted within the figure is consistent with the histogram presented in Figure 4a, showing that the impact is significant for about 86% of observations in the model.

[Figure 5 here]

We plot the marginal impact of coups on democratization conditioned on executive tenure in Figure 5b. Consistent with the coefficient on the interaction term in Table 2, Model 4, we see that impact of coups is strongest for executives that have held office for a long period of time. In fact, coups seem to have a significant impact on authoritarian failure only after the leader has held office for at least 8 years. The kernel density plot shows that this represents around 50 percent of the observations in the model. Taken together, the additional analyses presented in Figures 4-5 and Table 2 strongly support the notion that coups not only promote democratization, but are most effective against staunchly authoritarian leaders who have held office for a long period of time.

Our final concern is in regards to the longevity of democracy that follows coups. To this point, we have shown that coups significantly lead to authoritarian failure, but we have said nothing about the quality of democracy that is spawned from a coup. A thorough examination of this issue both theoretically and empirically would require an entirely new line of study. Our goal here is to provide at least some evidence that will allow us to speak to the issue. One of the most basic concerns is how long democracies last if they come from a coup vis-à-vis other processes. We examine this by counting the years that democracy held on following (1) no coups, (2) failed coups, and (3) successful coups. We present descriptive statistics for these categories in Figure 6.

[Figure 6 here]

This figure shows us the mean duration of democracy following coups for the above three categories. The top half of the figure shows results for all instances of democratization, while the bottom half removes the cases if the state remained a democracy until 2008. The figure clearly demonstrates that

democracies that were born following coups fair no worse than those produced by other means. In fact, they seem to do a bit better in regards to longevity, particularly following failed coups. However, t-tests between each group produce insignificant findings. Our only reasonable conclusion from these analyses, therefore, is that there is no meaningful difference in regards to democratic longevity based on whether or not the state had a recent coup prior to democratizing.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

The previous literature examining the relationship between coups and democracy provided very clear guideposts for policy-makers. The bulk of democratic failures were the result of coups, so coups *against democracies* should be harshly condemned in order to promote liberalization throughout the world. This study casts absolutely no doubt upon this conclusion. While we continue to contend that coups are absolutely bad for democracies, our efforts here were meant to cast light upon the impact of coups on democratization within authoritarian regimes (where we in fact find the vast majority of coups). Our discussion of coups within authoritarian regimes led to the prediction that coups are a viable way in which leaders can oust both highly repressive and long-standing dictators, and our analyses provided strong support for these propositions. Our recommendations for policy-makers are clear. Coups should be condemned if they come against democratic regimes, and should be condoned or supported if they oust authoritarian dictators.

Fortunately, these policy recommendations actually coincide quite well with the language currently codified in IO agreements and state laws. Section 608 of the Consolidated Appropriations Act (2008) mandates that all US aid be suspended following coups against “duly elected” heads of state, for example, while the 2001 Inter-American Charter focuses on states with “democratic order.”

Unfortunately, reality shows that assistance and membership is cut off regardless of path to power, as seen with the suspension of Mauritanian aid following the toppling of long-time military ruler Maaouya Ould Sid’Ahmad Taya, and the condemnation of the Honduran coup following Zeyala’s clear attempts at anti-democratic reforms. Thus, we urge both states and IOs to focus a great deal more attention on pre-coup levels of democracy when deciding how to respond to coup attempts.

We attempt to provide clearer instruction in this regard in Figure 7. This figure maps the most recent Freedomhouse scores for all states in the world. The first two categories include *free states* and *partly free states that are trending towards democracy*. Any coups perpetrated in these states should be quickly condemned to promote democracy. The third category includes states that are *partly free and stagnant*. Given our early findings that coups are most effective in promoting democratization among strongly authoritarian states, our recommendations are unfortunately unclear for this group. The final two categories include *partly free states that are trending towards authoritarianism*, and states that are *not free*. Our analyses suggest that states and IOs should consider supporting (or at least not condemn) coups among these states in order to promote democracy.

[Figure 7 here]

While our policy advice is supported by our analyses, it is incumbent upon researchers to continue focusing on the process of democratization in order to further our understanding of how to promote a freer world. Focusing on coups, we continue to know very little about the impact of coups on a number of key variables. While supporting a coup in Namibia might be palatable, supporting coups in China or Saudi Arabia are likely excellent ways to see the stock market crash and oil prices skyrocket. Given the worldwide benefits of democracy, researchers must continue to probe the democratizing process, while considering coups as a viable option. In a more general sense, we know surprisingly little about how other paths to democracy take place, particularly those that are amenable to external pressure. President Bush's invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq were clearly cloaked in terms of democracy-promotion, as have been a plethora of full-scale civil conflicts throughout the world. However, we need to discover how different policy options (e.g., supporting rebellions, launching invasions, increasing aid) are most effective in promoting democracy given the costs associated with each. While it is our hunch that coups are one of the least costly, most effective options for democracy promotion, much more work is clearly needed to provide robust conclusions. We hope this paper serves as an important step in this direction.

Figure 1. Pre-coup Polity IV Levels

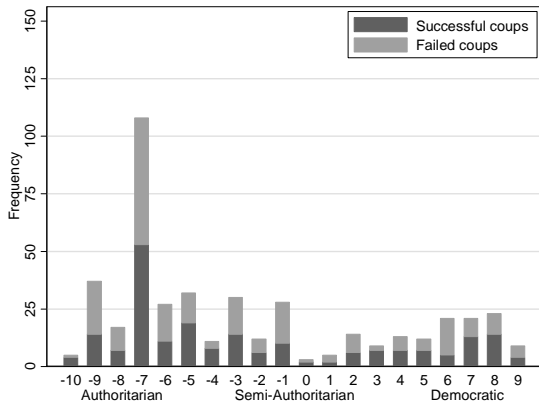


Figure 1a. 1950-2010

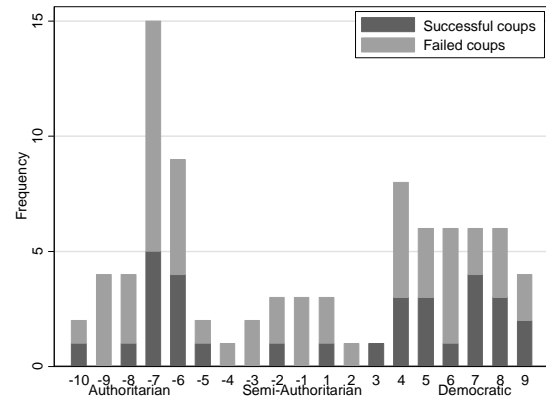
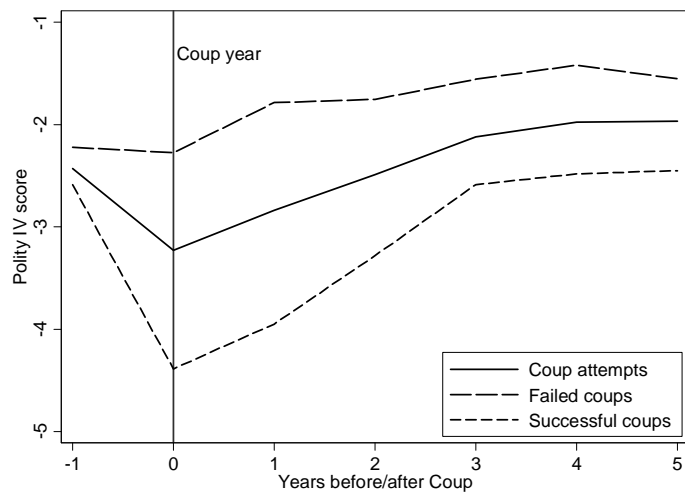


Figure 1b. 1990-2010

Note: The x-axis is the Polity IV index, which ranges from -10 (highly authoritarian) to +10 (highly democratic) (Marshall and Jaggers 2000). Coup frequencies come from Powell and Thyne (2011).

Figure 2. Mean Polity Trajectories, 1950 to 2008



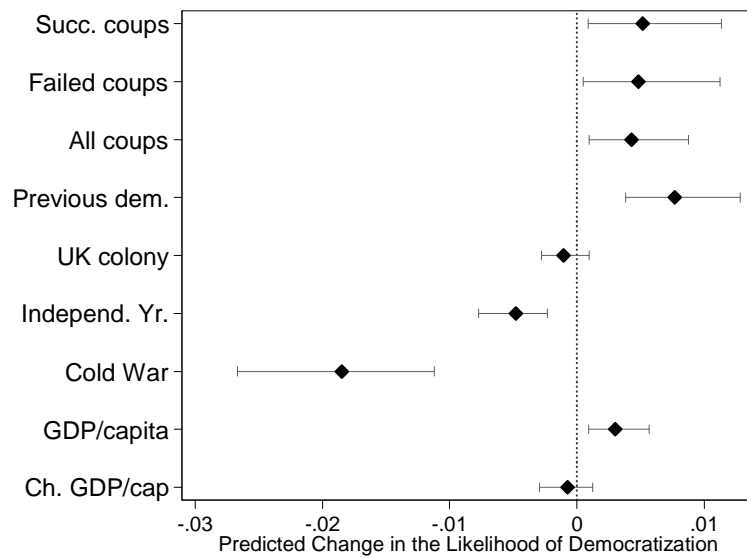
Note: The figure above shows the mean (collapsed) Polity IV score for all states experiencing a coup attempt.

Table 1: The Impact of Coups on Authoritarian Failure, 1950-2008

	1	2	3	min	max	%Δ
Recent succ. coup	0.679* (0.308)			.0048	.0098	102.5
Recent failed coup		0.649* (0.322)		.0049	.0098	97.4
Recent coup, any			0.645** (0.268)	.0046	.0090	93.2
Previous democ	0.942*** (0.248)	0.979*** (0.247)	0.963*** (0.248)	.0046	.0122	161.8
Former Brit. colony	-0.281 (0.295)	-0.273 (0.294)	-0.279 (0.295)	-	-	-
Year of ind.	-0.009*** (0.002)	-0.008*** (0.002)	-0.008*** (0.002)	.0077	.0033	-56.8
Cold War	-1.659*** (0.277)	-1.600*** (0.274)	-1.627*** (0.275)	.0232	.0047	-79.9
GDP/capita, ln	0.553* (0.246)	0.566* (0.247)	0.591** (0.248)	.0038	.0058	54.2
Ch. GDP/capita	-0.540 (0.894)	-0.498 (0.906)	-0.503 (0.923)	-	-	-
Constant	10.874** (4.664)	10.597* (4.656)	10.443* (4.692)			
Observations	4,828	4,828	4,828			
Wald Chi2	101.5***	100.8***	102.5***			

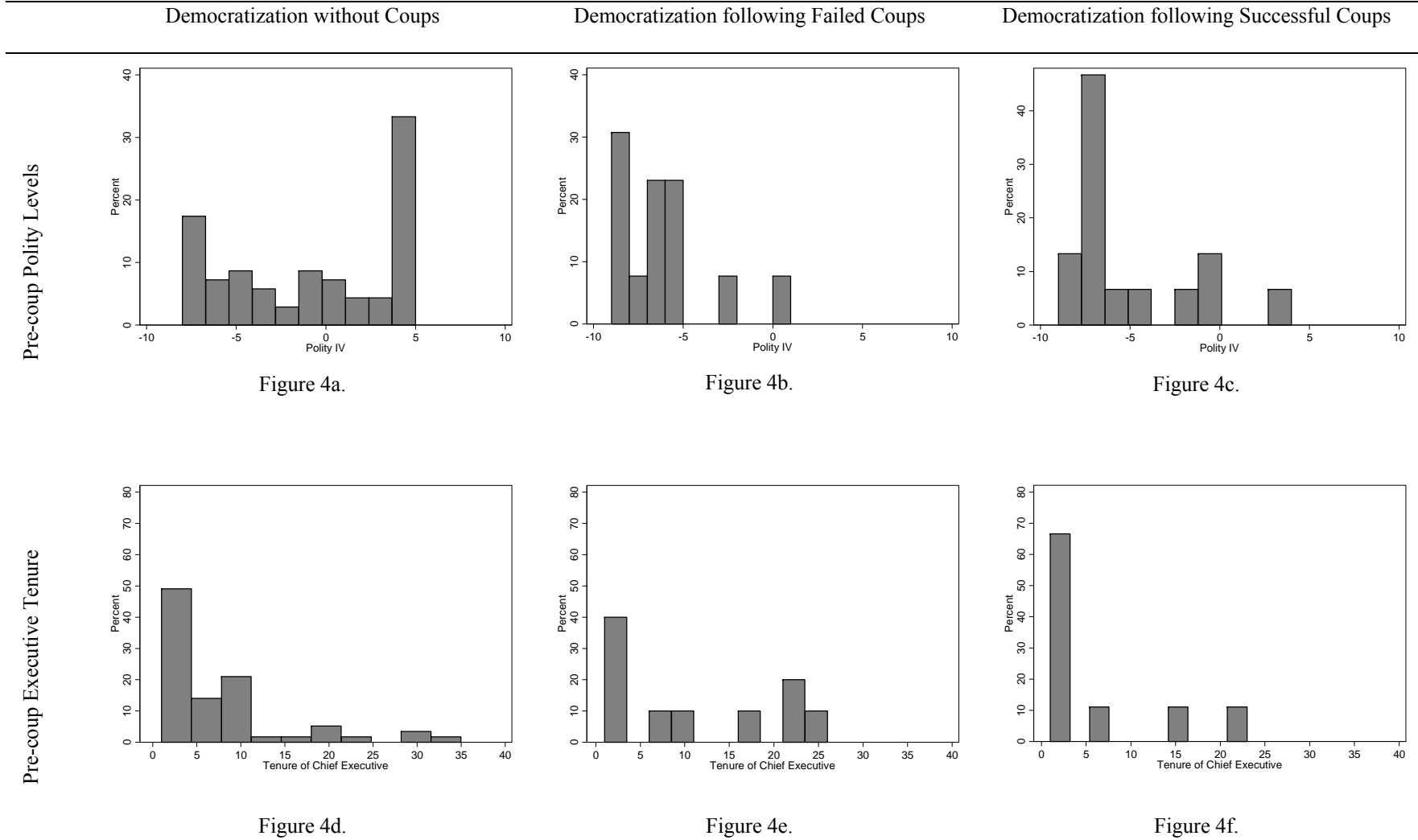
Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. Authoritarian years and splines not shown. ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05 (one-tailed).

Figure 3. The Impact of Coups on Authoritarian Failure, 1950-2008: Substantive Effects



Note: Values reveal first difference (FD) estimations (◆) with 95% confidence intervals (—). Estimations for control variables come from Table 1, Model 3.

Figure 4. Pre-democratization Polity and Executive Tenure, 1950-2008



Note: Figures above present Polity IV scores (Figures 4a-4c) and Executive tenure (Figures 4d-4f) for states in the year prior to democratization. Categories include states that democratized in the absence of coups (Figures 4a and 4d, n=70), states that democratized following a failed coup (Figures 4b & 4d, n=13), and states that democratized following successful coups (Figure 4c & 4f, n=15).

Table 2: Impact of Coups on Authoritarian Failure: Conditional Effects

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Recent coup	0.713** (0.270)	-0.131 (0.427)	0.346 (0.331)	-0.438 (0.452)
Coup*Polity		-0.244*** (0.067)		
Pre-coup polity	0.109*** (0.023)	0.156*** (0.026)		
Tenure of Chief Executive			-0.030* (0.017)	-0.050** (0.020)
Coup*Pre-coup exec. Tenure				0.114*** (0.036)
Previous democ	0.840*** (0.255)	0.815*** (0.256)	1.037*** (0.293)	1.076*** (0.296)
Former Brit. colony	-0.300 (0.303)	-0.412 (0.306)	-0.390 (0.332)	-0.370 (0.332)
Year of ind.	-0.008*** (0.002)	-0.008*** (0.002)	-0.009*** (0.003)	-0.010*** (0.003)
Cold War	-1.366*** (0.294)	-1.351*** (0.293)	-1.331*** (0.303)	-1.297*** (0.302)
GDP/capita, ln	0.561* (0.269)	0.559* (0.272)	0.361 (0.304)	0.377 (0.305)
Ch. GDP/capita	-0.485 (1.215)	-0.548 (1.175)	0.021 (1.320)	0.041 (1.281)
Constant	10.981* (4.916)	10.728* (4.979)	12.913* (5.553)	13.541** (5.616)
Observations	4,719	4,719	2,625	2,625
Wald Chi2	125.0***	141.2***	67.76***	76.08***

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. Authoritarian years and splines not shown.

***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05 (one-tailed).

Figure 5. Effect of Coups Conditioned on Pre-coup Polity and Executive Tenure

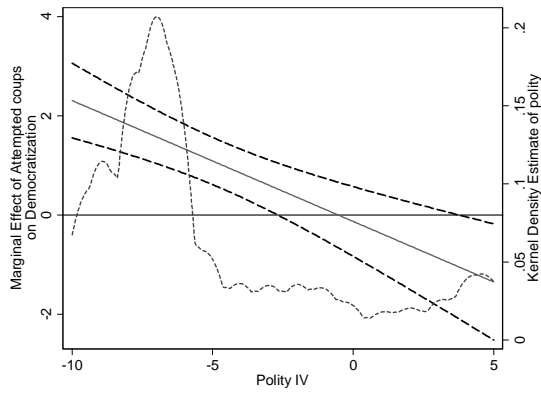


Figure 5a.

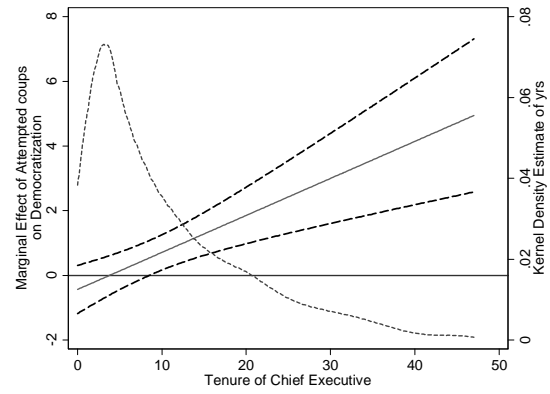
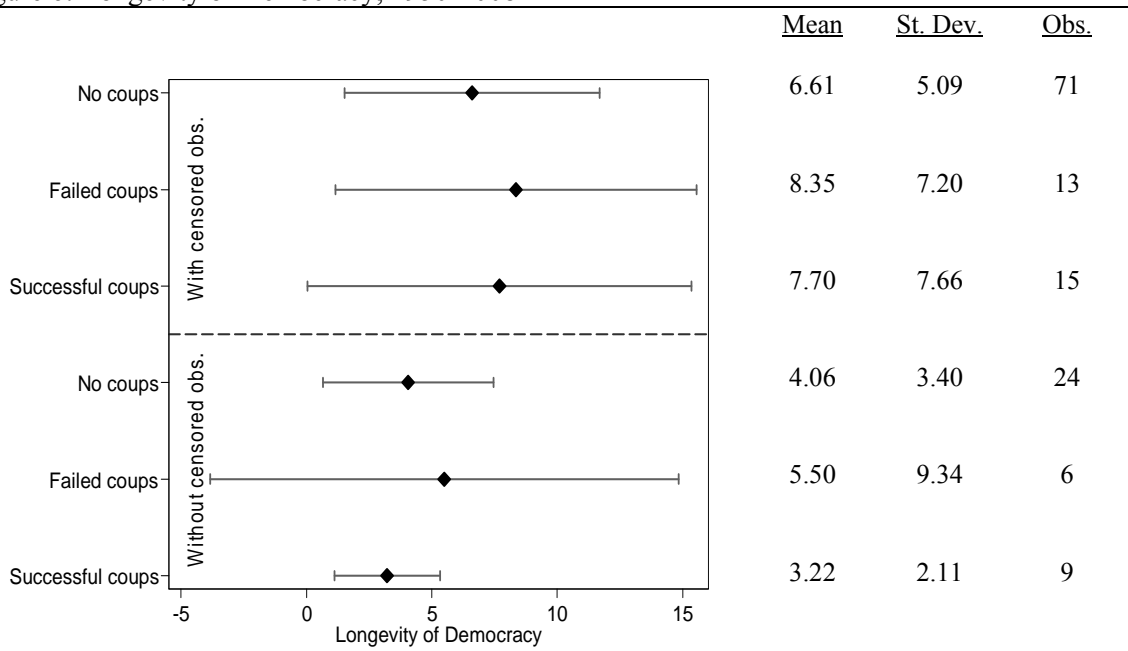


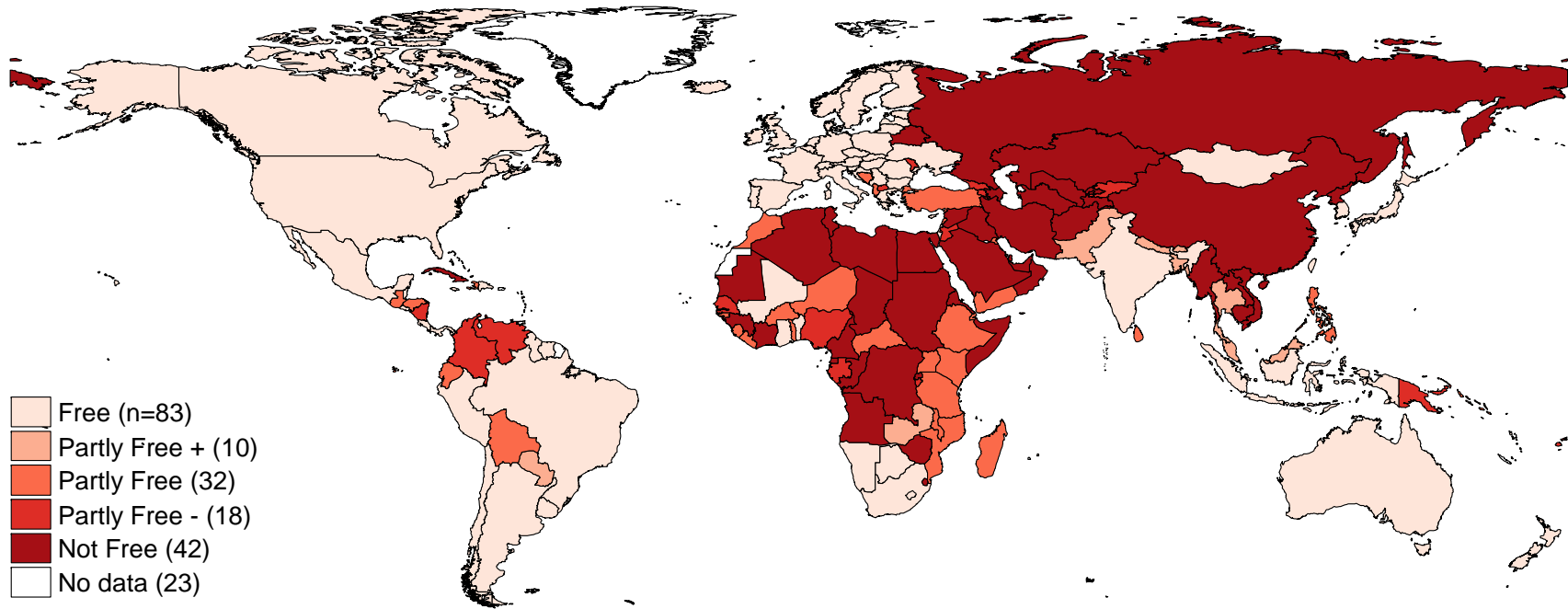
Figure 5b.

Figure 6: Longevity of Democracy, 1950-2008



Note: Black diamonds display the mean for each group; whiskers show +1 and -1 standard deviation from the mean.

Figure 7: Freedomhouse State Scores, 2009



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NOTES

¹ See Section 608 of the Fiscal Year 2008 Consolidated Appropriations Act.

² This viewpoint concurs with previous work highlighting the benefits of coups, including Huntington's (1968) assertion that coups prevent more catastrophic disruptions, and Snyder's (1992) claim that coups are efficient means of removing dictators.

³ Section 513, Foreign Operations, Export Financing, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 1993). See Section 608 of the Fiscal Year 2008 Consolidated Appropriations Act for the relevant current language.

⁴ In Figure 2, state/years coded with a polity transition score (-66, -77, -88) are replaced with the state's most recent value. Doing otherwise (or using the 'polity2' option) is apt to inflate the growth in polity over time. The figure is nearly identical when transitional states are omitted.

⁵ Our discussion is supported by Lindberg and Clark's (2008) investigation of the relationship between coups and democracy in Africa from 1990 to 2004. Compared to authoritarian regimes, they find that democracies are 7.5 times less likely to experience coup attempts and 18 times less likely to fail as a result of coup attempts.

⁶ Geddes' (1999) assertion that coup leaders are rarely motivated by self interest is supported by Thompson (1973), who finds that fewer than half of coup attempts come about due to organizational grievances among the military. Zuk and Thompson (1982) concur, finding that levels of military spending do not increase following a coup, suggesting that a lack of funding is not necessarily a concern for coup plotters.

⁷ While defining democracies as $\geq +6$ is conventional in the literature and recommended by the Polity coders (Marshall and Jaggers 2000), we ran several analyses to assure that the results are insensitive to this coding decision. This included testing various cut-off points using the Polity index (0 through +7) and using the "Free" category from Freedomhouse (2010). Results are robust and frequently stronger across each specification. We chose to present the most conventional approach.

⁸ This approach is akin to time-varying duration analyses, where the unit of analysis is time and the dependent variable is the probability of observing some event (democratization in this case) at time t , given covariates at time t and the fact that the observation has survived to time t . We also ran the analyses using Cox and Weibull duration analyses, which yielded substantively identical results. We present the results using logistic regression due to ease in interpretation.

⁹ According to Powell and Thyne (2011:6), a coup is considered successful if the perpetrators “seize and hold power for at least seven days.”

¹⁰ We ran many analyses to assure that our results are robust to various specifications of the independent variable, including coups as a single yearly observation, and coding positive values for 2-5 years. All results were substantively identical to those shown here. We decided to present the results for coups plus 2 years because this seemed like a reasonable amount of time to expect leaders to make meaningful reforms following either a successful or failed coup attempt.

¹¹ In addition to the control variables that appear in Table 1, we also experimented with a number of additional control variables to assure the robustness of our results, including measures for ethnic fractionalization, urban population, and regional dummies. The inclusion of none of these variables makes any meaningful impact on our hypotheses tests. Thus, we present the most parsimonious model possible.

¹² Running both successful and failed coups in the same model influences our results little. Successful coups remain significant ($p < .042$), while failed coups becomes borderline insignificant ($p < .069$).

¹³ We should note that while the substantive effects seem large, the rareness of the dependent variable produces small predicted probabilities in general. This is similar to other analyses of rare dependent variables (e.g., dyadic conflict).

¹⁴ Data for executive tenure come from the Database of Political Institutions (Beck, et al. 2001; Keefer 2005).