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An assessment of the ‘democratic’ coup theory

Democratic trajectories in Africa, 1952–2012

Jonathan M. Powell

The Egyptian military’s unconstitutional removal of President Mohamed Morsi has reignited a debate regarding the theory of the ‘democratic coup’. Though coups are almost invariably condemned, many political observers and a few scholars have recently argued that coups can act as catalysts for democratisation. This paper empirically assesses the democratic coup hypothesis for Africa. Multivariate analyses from 1952 to 2012 suggest that coups statistically improve a country’s democratisation prospects. Extensions of the model show that coups appear to be likely precursors for democratisation in staunchly authoritarian regimes and have become less likely to end democracy over time, and that their positive influence has strengthened since the end of the Cold War. As of 2012, countries that have experienced a recent coup are expected to be four times more likely to witness a democratic transition than those that have remained coup-free.

Keywords coup d’etat, democratisation, regime change

Introduction

Many observers openly hoped – or even expected – that the fall of dictators such as Hosni Mubarak during the Arab Spring would usher in a new era of democratic governance in the region. Transitional countries face a host of challenges in achieving democratisation, and political futures are frequently uncertain. This is perhaps best manifested, for the current discussion, in the subsequent removal of President Mohamed Morsi by the Egyptian Armed Forces in early July 2013. Though the Egyptian military continues to claim a commitment to restoring and furthering democratic institutions, institutions which they claim Morsi had been undermining, the international community has shown far less optimism following Egypt’s second coup in three years. However, recent years have seen renewed interest in the phenomenon that will here be referred to as the ‘democratic coup’, previously described as

coups that ‘overthrow a totalitarian or authoritarian regime – not for the purpose of indefinite personified change – but for the limited purpose of transitioning the regime to a democracy and holding fair and free democratic elections within a short span of time’.¹

Coup leaders frequently veil their efforts with pledges to combat corruption, poverty and abuse of power, amongst other things, even if more selfish motives are present. Idi Amin, for example, claimed that his ousting of Milton Obote was justified due to the latter’s corruption, tribalism and ‘favoritism in public appointments’, and his rewarding ‘the rich, big men’.² Perhaps more sincerely, Colonel A. A. Afrifa has written about the Ghanaian army’s action as a ‘last resort’ to combat the authoritarian entrenchment of the once wildly popular Kwame Nkrumah.³ But even an army that brings about some degree of democratisation can also promote a constitution that reserves ‘substantive constitutional powers for itself ... [or] may establish counter-majoritarian institutions ... that continue to enforce the military’s policy preferences’.⁴ Focusing solely on praetorian outcomes such as Amin’s Uganda, however, inevitably biases our ability to assess the potential for coups to lead to a wider range of outcomes, including democratic gains. Few would condemn then-Lieutenant Colonel Amadou Toumani Touré’s 1991 ousting of President Moussa Traoré, whose regime had led the country into economic crisis and had actively repressed dissent, leading to over 150 civilian deaths in March 1991 alone. Following the removal of the ineffectual leader, Touré immediately consulted the opposition, appointed the United National Development Program’s Soumana Sacko as interim Prime Minister, and withdrew the military from politics, allowing Mali to be guided to democratic rule within just a few years. As Frances Ikome has questioned, ‘what options are left for an oppressed people, when the oppressors constrain all avenues of peaceful change’?⁵

Democratic coups have even been promoted as a policy option by prominent economist Paul Collier, who has noted that ‘there is only one credible counter to dictatorial power: the country’s own army’.⁶ However, Touré’s ousting by his own military in March 2012 further illustrates the complicated nature of coups and their relationship with democratisation. The goal of this paper is to objectively assess the influence of coups on democratic trajectories, with a specific focus on recent claims that *coups d’état* can lead to democratic gains. Multivariate analyses for the years 1952 to 2012 reveal that, *ceteris paribus*, coups have indeed acted as meaningful agents for democratic gains in Africa. Though many coups have led to adverse political developments, the statistical reality is that African states, particularly dictatorships, are significantly more likely to democratise in the three years following coups.⁷ The investigation also shows that although coups have become less frequent, post-coup democratisation has become a more likely scenario for a wider range of states under the African Union (AU).

Foundations

Recent years have seen a number of scholars attempt to assess the influence of coups on democratic processes. Thyne and Powell, for example, use a global sample of authoritarian regimes to demonstrate that democratisation is more likely to occur in the wake of either failed or successful coups.⁸ Meanwhile, Marinov and Goemans find that coups are significantly more likely to be followed by elections since the end of the Cold War.⁹ Finally, Miller has shown that violent forms of regime change can lead to democratic gains.¹⁰ Each of these offerings can be said to suffer from important limitations. Thyne and Powell’s focus on

authoritarian regimes leaves the reader to assume that coups are invariably harmful to democracies over time. Marinov and Goemans's excellent assessment tells us that we can now expect elections in the aftermath of coups, yet we find little discussion of the character of those elections and the strength of democracy more generally. Finally, Miller's effort conflates coups with a variety of other forms of anti-regime activity, such as civil wars and revolutions. Each of these events has different sources, involve different actors, and can be theoretically expected to have different implications for a country's political development. While coups are swift and often bloodless events, civil wars can have more disastrous long-term consequences for a country's infrastructure, foreign investment, and so on.

This offering focuses specifically on *coups d'état*, defined as 'illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive'.¹¹ In attempting to discern the relationship between coups and democratisation, it is useful to begin with a brief look at the political and economic background that we can expect to accompany coups. Table 1 reports coup activity for each respective region of the world from 1950 to 2012.

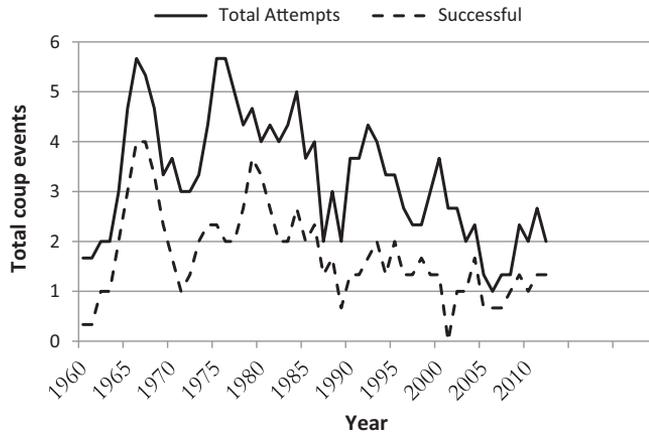
Africa has had the most coup activity by region, both by raw frequency and by rate. However, Table 1 also reveals that while coups are most likely to occur in Africa, coups in the region tend to target regimes that are far worse off than regimes targeted in other regions. The typical coup-targeted African regime averaged -3,3 on the Polity scale, compared to -1,1 for the Americas, -0,1 for Asia and Oceania, and -1,4 for Europe. Only the democracy-starved Middle East (-4,3) sees coups typically target less democratic regimes. Coups in Africa target countries that average US\$1 563 in GDP per capita, well under half that seen in the Americas (US\$3 394), and easily less than Asia and Oceania, the regions with the next lowest mean. Finally, coups target African regimes that average an abysmal -0,4 per cent growth rate, which is again the lowest value by region.

This quick glance at the data suggests that, if anything, one might expect coups to have been even more frequent in Africa. Based on levels of democratisation, state wealth, and economic growth, when compared to other regions it appears that Africa's militaries have actually exercised some degree of restraint. Beyond these tendencies, the efforts of the AU in deterring coups and promoting democratic governance have been increasingly well

Table 1 Regional economic and political indicators at time of coups, 1950–2012

Region	Coups	Rate	Polity	GDPpc	Growth
Africa	180	6,7%	-3,3	1563	-0,4%
Americas	117	6,1%	-1,1	3394	1,1%
Middle East	44	5,3%	-4,3	16517	-0,2%
Asia & Oceania	51	2,6%	-0,1	1983	1,9%
Europe	10	0,5%	-1,4	8556	2,7%

Note *Coups* refers to the number of years in which each country in the region experienced at least one coup attempt. *Rate* refers to the percentage of country-years in the sample that experienced a coup. *Polity* refers to the Polity IV data project's assessment of each state's level of democratisation.¹² The scale ranges from -10 to +10, with -10 representing states with the least amount of political freedom and competition and +10 representing the countries with the most. For illustration, +5 is commonly used as a dichotomous cut-off point to distinguish democracies from non-democracies. *GDPpc* refers to gross domestic product per capita in constant 2000 United States (US) dollars.¹³ *Growth* refers to year-to-year percentage changes in GDPpc.

Figure 1 The frequency of coups in Africa (three-year average), 1960–2012

Note Visual representations of descriptive temporal trends in Figures 1 and 2 due to the small number of independent states prior to 1960. Figure 3 reflects the full sample.

established.¹⁴ A three-year average of temporal trends is illustrated in Figure 1. Africa witnessed a ‘precipitous’ decline in coups following the Cold War, particularly during the AU years, though with the global economic crisis we have seen a modest spike in coup activity.¹⁵ Recent empirical efforts have demonstrated that the international community has in fact responded more harshly to coups,¹⁶ that these efforts seem to be successfully deterring them,¹⁷ and that coup-born leaders remain in power for substantially shorter periods of time. Recent high-profile actions in Mali (2012) and Egypt (2011, 2013) have of course led to renewed interest both in coups and in the consequences of these actions for a state’s long-term political trajectory. The following sections aim to provide an empirical assessment of those trajectories from 1952 to 2012.

Hypothesis and data

The preceding discussion has led to the following research hypothesis: all else being equal, coups are expected to influence democratic trajectories.

A few comments are in order. First, a non-directional hypothesis has been adopted. That is, there are arguments for and especially against coups as agents of democratisation. A proper evaluation of the merits of these arguments is far beyond the scope of this paper, which ultimately seeks to determine the statistical relationship, if any, that coups have with democratisation. Second, any conclusions include a caveat of ‘all else being equal’ due to the need to introduce a number of control variables. Coups and democratisation each have a number of purported causes, many of which are shared (e.g., state wealth), so it is important to account for other factors that might explain democratisation. Finally, ‘democratic trajectories’ refers to a state’s tendency to become more or less democratic over time. In addition to looking at small-scale changes in a state’s Polity score, the analysis also considers whether or not a country can be said to have undergone a ‘democratic transition’.

As previously stated, a country’s current level of democratisation is accounted for with the Polity scale, ranging from –10 (least democratic) to +10 (most democratic). ‘Democratic

transitions' are said to occur when a country reaches the +5 threshold on the Polity scale, following a period of non-democratic governance. There are important distinctions between these variables. First, the latter measure is perhaps limited in that it does not account for many changes in a state's democratic-ness. For example, the aforementioned coup removing Nkrumah saw Ghana improve from -7 to $+3$ within a few years. Though Ghana saw substantial short-term improvements in democratic governance (which were later reversed), this large increase in Polity is not captured by the transition version of the dependent variable. Consequently, the dichotomous transition measure can potentially provide a more challenging test of the hypothesis. Second, the measure captures whether or not a country actually improved to a commonly accepted threshold for being a democracy. While Ghana, for example, certainly improved following the removal of Nkrumah, to speak of the country as democratic in 1970 would be incredibly misleading.

A summary of these and other central concepts, and their operationalisations, is available in [Table 2](#). The independent variable of interest is 'coup spell', the three calendar years that immediately follow a coup. The base models in [Table 3](#) report the relationship between democratic trajectories and spells following all coup attempts, successful coup attempts, and failed coup attempts. Another variable accounts for the existence of a coup in the current year. While a coup is expected to negatively influence democratisation in the current year due to the suspension of constitutional processes, the subsequent spell could see increased political freedoms.

A state's prior legacy is accounted for by including 'Polity lagged', a control for the Polity score from the previous year, and a number of others that are commonly included in statistical models for democratisation. 'Cold War', for example, is expected to have a negative association. Former 'British colonies' have long been argued to be more democratic, as have countries that have had 'independence' for longer periods. The relationship between democratisation and economic development has been 'established beyond any reasonable doubt'.¹⁸ I thus include a measure for GDP per capita. Finally, I consider the country's current level of economic growth. There are, of course, innumerable variables that can be included, but I take Achen's warning that regression models with excessive predictor variables are likely to produce inaccurate parameters.¹⁹ Those appearing in the models have been chosen due to their consistency in being associated with the dependent variable and to maximise the geographic and temporal scope of the analyses.

Preliminary tests

[Table 3](#) presents six models that assess the direct relationship between a coup spell and a state's democratic trajectory. The first three models summarise ordinary least squares (OLS) regression, testing for the influence of being in any coup spell (Model 1), successful coup spells (Model 2), or failed coup spells (Model 3), respectively. These are followed by three logistic regressions that assess the dichotomous models for democratic transitions when limiting the sample to states that were previously non-democracies.

The first two regressions yield positive and significant coefficients, suggesting that any coup spell and successful coup spells do in fact witness democratic gains. Successful coups seem to promote a positive democratic trajectory while failed coups have an ambiguous influence. A major advantage of OLS regression is that the coefficient is readily interpretable.

Table 2 Conceptual and operational definitions for central themes

Conceptual definition	Operationalisation
<i>Coup d'état:</i> 'Illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive'. (Source: Powell & Thyne, 2011)	States are coded as '1' if they experienced at least one coup attempt in a given year. Years with multiple attempts are coded '1'. States with no attempts are coded as '0'.
<i>Successful coup:</i> A coup, as defined above, that sees the 'perpetrators [or their associates] hold power for at least seven days'. (Source: Powell & Thyne, 2011, 252)	States are coded '1' if at least one successful coup occurred in a given year. Multiple successes are coded as '1'. States are coded '0' if no coups were attempted or if all coup attempts failed.
<i>Failed coup:</i> A coup, as defined above, that sees the perpetrators fail to hold power for at least seven days. (Source: Powell & Thyne, 2011, 252)	States are coded '1' if at least one failed coup occurred in a given year. Multiple failures are coded as '1'. States are coded '0' if no coups were attempted or if all coup attempts succeeded.
<i>Coup spell:</i> The temporal period immediately following the attempting of a coup. (Source: Powell & Thyne, 2011)	States are coded '1' for three full calendar years following the attempting of a coup. States are coded '0' if a coup has not occurred in the prior three years.
<i>Democratic trajectory:</i> The tendency of a state to becoming either more or less democratic over time. (Source: Marshall & Jagers, Polity IV dataset)	A state's Polity score, on a scale of -10 to +10, controlling for its score in the previous year, or the likelihood of witnessing a democratic transition. States are coded as democratic, or '1', if they are +5 or above on the Polity scale. States are coded '0' if they are below +5.
<i>Democratic transition:</i> The movement of a state from a period of non-democratic rule to democratic rule. (Source: Marshall & Jagers, Polity IV dataset)	States are coded '1' if they move from being a non-democratic regime to a democratic regime, as defined above, in a given year. States are coded '0' if they were already democratic or remained non-democratic.
<i>Democratic coup:</i> A coup that is followed by positive democratic trajectory. (Source: Powell & Thyne, 2011; Marshall & Jagers, Polity IV dataset)	States are seen as experiencing a democratic coup when they 1) improve on the polity scale or 2) experience a democratic transition within three years of a successful coup.
Note Alternative measures for all coup spells, successful coup spells, and failed coup spells are ultimately incorporated in the analysis, though the focus is overwhelmingly on successful coups. Analyses incorporating alternative lengths for coup spells are reported in the Appendix. ²⁰	

The value of 0,25 for a successful coup spell in Model 2 tells us that countries in a spell are expected to be 0,25 points higher on the Polity scale than those that are not. The insignificance of the variable in Model 3 indicates that Model 1 is likely driven by the successful coups that are teased out when disaggregating the outcome of the coup. However, there are two potential caveats. First, failed coups are more difficult to observe than the successes captured in the data. An effort was made to utilise the most comprehensive and reliable data available but the potential for the failed coup measure to be flawed cannot be discounted. Second, theoretically, we cannot assume that all failed coups will send equal signals to the government regarding its vulnerability. Harvey Kebschull, for example, points to data-gathering efforts as inevitably conflating 'serious, well-developed' failed coup efforts with 'superficial, shotgun attempt[s] by a few, poorly organized officers'.²¹ The latter type of action could even provide the pretence for autocrats to purge the regime of would-be opponents. Future investigations could benefit

Table 3. OLS and logistic regressions for African democratic trajectories, 1952–2012

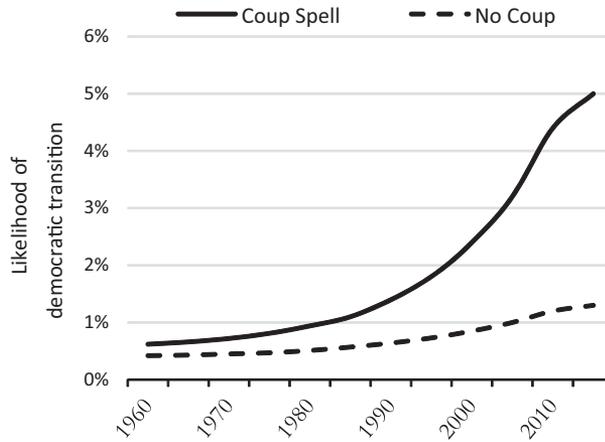
	Level of democracy			Democratic transition		
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Coup spell	0,254** (0,092)	0,270** (0,110)	0,090 (0,122)	0,650 (0,410)	0,876* (0,435)	0,326 (0,532)
Polity _(year-1)	0,935*** (0,007)	0,937*** (0,007)	0,934*** (0,007)			
Coup	-1,391*** (0,141)	-2,298*** (0,185)	-0,668*** (0,198)	0,470 (0,554)	0,531 (0,735)	1,215* (0,639)
Cold War	-0,604*** (0,077)	-0,598*** (0,076)	-0,636*** (0,079)	-1,860*** (0,393)	-1,878*** (0,401)	-1,831*** (0,400)
British colony	0,060 (0,072)	0,055 (0,071)	0,073 (0,074)	0,633* (0,356)	0,621* (0,355)	0,590* (0,351)
Independence	0,000 (0,002)	0,000 (0,002)	0,000 (0,002)	-0,004 (0,006)	-0,005 (0,006)	-0,004 (0,006)
Wealth	-0,007 (0,041)	-0,017 (0,041)	-0,003 (0,042)	-0,780** (0,299)	-0,790** (0,295)	-0,863** (0,300)
Growth	-0,031 (0,270)	-0,071 (0,267)	-0,012 (0,275)	0,403 (0,677)	0,264 (0,664)	0,250 (0,684)
Constant	-0,203 (3,016)	0,178 (2,978)	-0,331 (3,075)	10,047 (11,343)	11,502 (10,806)	10,681 (11,030)
Observations	2,244	2,244	2,244	1,858	1,858	1,858

Note * p < 0,05; ** p < 0,01; *** p < 0,001 (one tailed). Transition models reflect rare events logistic regression.

from a detailed exploration of the degree to which failed attempts truly threatened the government. Though the current analyses question the relationship between failed coups and democratisation, this conclusion must be guarded.

The rare events logistic regressions in Models 4–6 echo those seen in the OLS regressions. Beyond seeing countries move from ‘least democratic’ to ‘less democratic’ classifications following a successful coup, these models demonstrate that countries in successful coup spells are more likely to make a transition to democracy.

Coup spell interacts with year in Figure 2 in order to provide an additional illustration of the findings. Aside from simply breaking the sample into temporal ranges, interacting the independent variable of interest with the year and then graphing the conditional association allows us to see how the influence of coups on democratic trajectories has changed over time. Holding other variables at their median, the likelihood of any one country democratising in a given year between 1960 and 2012 is a paltry 0,6 per cent. We do, however, see important differences for states in coup spells as well as temporal tendencies. Having a coup spell in 1970 provides a similarly unimpressive increase of 0,7 per cent, but this probability increases to 1,0 per cent by 1980, 1,4 per cent by 1990, 2,4 per cent in 2000, and 4,4 per cent in 2010. These values can be compared with much lower likelihoods of democratisation in the absence of a coup: 0,45 per cent in 1970, 0,51 per cent in 1980, 0,64 per cent in 1990, 0,85 per cent in 2000,

Figure 2 Coup spells as catalysts for democratisation, 1960–2012

Note Simulations are computed using the Clarify program developed by Michael Tomz, Jason Wittenberb, and Gary King, *CLARIFY: Software for interpreting and presenting statistical results*, Stanford University, University of Wisconsin, and Harvard University, 2003.

and 1,2 per cent in 2010. A state in a coup spell in 2012 is four times more likely to make a democratic transition (5 per cent) than a state that is not (1,3 per cent).

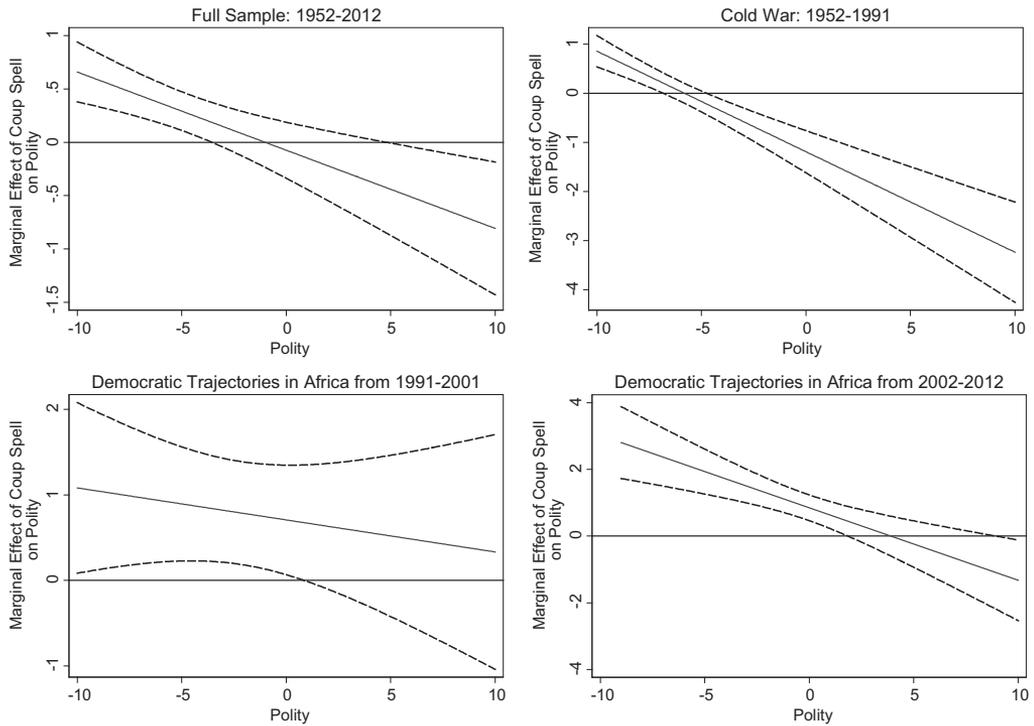
The next section will focus more heavily on successful coups since they are driving the results seen in [Table 3](#) and because successful coups are attractive candidates for study in that they – almost by definition – will lead to some sort of political change.

The influence of coups as a condition of targeted regime traits

To further test the relationship, successful coup spells are interacted with a state's Polity value at the time of the coup. This allows the model to consider how a coup spell can influence trajectories for counties that were at different levels of Polity prior to the coup. For example, we might assume that the overthrow of President Traoré in 1991 could open the door for a democratic transition in a country that at the time had a polity score of -7 . Conversely, the ousting of President Touré in 2012, at a Polity score of $+7$, has been met with considerably more alarm and has prompted fears that Mali might face a long-term reversion to authoritarianism.

[Figure 3](#) illustrates these results for the interactive models. The top left graph illustrates the conditional influence of a recent successful coup on democratic trajectory for different values of the state's prior level of democratisation for the full sample (1952–2012), while the top right illustrates a sample for the Cold War (1952–1991), the bottom left shows the era between the Cold War and the launch of the AU (1992–2001), and the bottom right shows the relationship for the AU years (2002–2012). The y-axis provides the regression coefficient, interpreted as in [Table 3](#). The x-axis allows us to see how the regression coefficient's size, direction, or significance can change as if the coup spell occurred at each respective value of the Polity scale (-10 to $+10$). Falling on the horizontal line seen at $\gamma = 0$ would indicate that the coup spell is having no influence on a state's democratic trajectory, as seen when Polity is just below 0 in

Figure 3 The conditional influence of coup spells on democratic trajectories, 1952–2012



the full sample or -5 during the Cold War. The dashed line represents a 95 per cent margin of error for the regression coefficient. So while our observed regression coefficient for a Polity score of -10 , at the far left, is $+0,7$, the actual number could be as low as about $+0,4$ or as high as about $+1,0$. If the high and low confidence intervals are on different sides of the y -line ($y = 0$) we can conclude that the association is insignificant for the given level of Polity.

Our full sample reveals that coups do indeed have disparate influences on democratic trajectories for states with different prior Polity levels. At the left extreme, we see that authoritarian states in a coup spell are significantly more likely to see democratic gains than those that are not in a spell. The substantive strength of this relationship, however, subsides as the prior level of Polity increases. The relationship eventually becomes insignificant at a Polity score of -3 , and proceeds to become negative and significant when the spell occurs in what was previously a democracy (above $+5$ on Polity). In short, the analysis indicates that coups targeting staunchly authoritarian regimes are likely to bring democratic gains, those that target 'mixed' regimes that share authoritarian and democratic traits will have an ambiguous influence on democratic trajectories, and those targeting democracies will effectively undermine its democratic trajectory.

Our Cold War sample reveals a similar slope but with important differences. Coups typically promote a positive democratic trajectory when targeting regimes that are worse than -6 on Polity. Coups targeting regimes above -4 , meanwhile see a significant reduction. More to the point, the magnitude of this reduction is far worse than that seen in the full sample. For

example, in the full sample we would not have expected a meaningful change following a coup targeting a state with a +5 Polity score. During the Cold War, however, that country would have seen a drop of about 2.5, echoing Figure 2's suggestion that there are important temporal implications for the relationship.

The bottom row of the figure illustrates the relationship in the post-Cold War era. First, on the left, we see the 'interregnum' period prior to the AU's launch. This graph reveals a flatter slope that is largely similar to the full sample. Only countries below 0 on Polity witness a significant change in trajectory following a coup. Coups targeting states at or above 0 see no significant change. While perhaps unimpressive at first glance, the interpretation of this finding has important consequences: democratic countries targeted by coups are no longer witnessing a significant erosion of their democratic trajectories. Even when now rare coups do occur, they are not as strong a long-term threat to democracy, a tendency that is likely due to the international community's increased interest in promoting political liberalisation.

The bottom right illustrates the relationship during the AU years. We again see a similar slope, but the intercept with the y-line and the size of the regression coefficients again reveal important differences. First, states at the lowest Polity extreme are expected to see a 3-unit increase in their Polity score following a coup. This is three times higher than that seen during the Cold War. Second, the lower confidence interval's intercept with the y-line tells us that any country below +2 is more likely to see democratic gains following a coup than those that do not experience a coup. This was true for countries below -6 during the Cold War. Put another way, a larger range of countries are now democratising following successful coups. Democratic coups are no longer reserved for toppling dictators, but could actually promote democratic gains in fledgling mixed regimes that are merely leaning toward authoritarianism. Finally, while the Cold War typically saw coups undermine democratisation for regimes above -4, this trend is expected for regimes at +10 under the AU. Other democratic regimes are expected to do no better or worse following coups. Even this number is effectively theoretical, as no coup has ever targeted a regime at +10 in Africa and only one coup has targeted such a regime in the entire world (Cyprus in 1974). Although coups continue to be described as the most common cause of democratic failure, they are statistically insignificant in the current era, a symptom of other causes of democratic failure instead of a stand-alone determinant of it.

The current state of affairs

These findings actually correspond well with reality if we consider democratic trajectories in recent years. The 2003 ousting of democratically elected Kumba Yala actually saw Guinea-Bissau's Polity score increase from +5 at the time of the coup to +6 by 2005. Mauritania's 'to democratic midwife and abort' experience saw the country transition from -6 at the time of President Taya's ousting in 2005 to +4 in 2007.²² Though the military effectively ended democratic deepening with its 2008 coup, the country's 2012 rank of -2 is still an improvement over the Taya years.²³ Guinea saw a modest improvement from -1 to +1 after the military's seizure of power following the death of long-time ruler Lansana Conté in 2008. Niger saw the military actively restore (a perhaps flawed) democracy following President Mamadou Tandja's increasing authoritarianism. Niger ranked -3 prior to his 2010 ousting and in 2011 returned to +6, where the country had ranked prior to Tandja's efforts to subvert the constitution.

This is not to say that all coups are good. Togo saw a modest reversion following the military's efforts to install Fauré Gnassingbé to the presidency following his father's 2005 death (-2 to -4) and Madagascar saw its polity score drop from +7 to +3 following the military's 2009 removal of President Ravalomanana in favour of disc-jockey-turned-mayor Andry Rajoelina. Further, while many countries might experience democratic gains following a coup attempt, far worse outcomes can occur as well. Aside from democratic reversals, coup attempts have set the stage for civil wars (e.g., Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire), genocide (Rwanda), and economic decline (numerous).

The efforts of the international community to both deter and respond to coups, and particularly efforts at promoting democratisation, seem to have effectively eliminated what we might think of as praetorian coups that lead to the installation of a bona fide military regime. These analyses and cases tell us that recent events in Egypt and Mali, though concerning, can be met with guarded optimism. Though both face a number of challenges in moving toward or returning to democratic governance, success in these efforts is clearly feasible.

Conclusion

The preceding analyses assessed post-coup democratic trajectories. What is (perhaps conspicuously) absent from this discussion is coverage of the political processes that take place in these transitory periods. Samuel Huntington, in his seminal *The Third Wave*, pointed to Portugal's 1974 coup as leading to democratisation not only in Portugal, but as the beginning of a global wave of democratisation efforts.²⁴ Huntington has referred to the outcome of the Carnation Revolution as 'unwitting', since democratisation was not even a specific goal of the plotters. Indeed, this paper has avoided a discussion of the purported goals of coup conspirators. Such motives can be difficult to discern and impossible to verify, as seen with the Amin case briefly noted in the introduction. However, this paper has found strong evidence that – regardless of motive – coups can act as a democratic shock to the political system in authoritarian regimes. Not only has democratisation been seen following coup spells, there are important differences for different regime types and temporal periods. Coups were almost invariably harmful to democracies and mixed regimes during the Cold War, but recent years have seen them become less apt to reversals to authoritarianism. To the contrary, now more than ever, non-democratic regimes are actually witnessing democratic improvements following coups, even full transitions to democracy. A logical next step in exploring this association is to more closely evaluate the actual processes of reform that guide transitions, including the role of the international community. Perhaps then can we make a stronger judgement that democratic transitions occur because of coups and not in spite of them.

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Notes

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- 20 The Appendix, data, and replication materials are available at <http://www.jonathanmpowell.com/research.html> (accessed 19 May 2014).
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