

## Coup d'etat or Coup d'Autocracy?

How Coups Impact Democratization, 1950-2008

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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 the vast majority of coups do not happen in democracies. Therefore, we focus on authoritarian regimes in seeking to discover how coups might open paths towards democratization. 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 view failed coups as credible signals that leaders must enact meaningful reforms to remain in power. Empirical analyses strongly support the argument that coups promote democratization, particularly among states that are least likely to democratize otherwise.

With the recent challenges to a number of authoritarian regimes in the so-called “Arab Spring,” scholars and policy-makers have been scrambling to understand why these events came about and what the ultimate future of these regimes will be. Though much remains to be seen, we can begin to draw important lessons from these events. Western leaders quickly highlighted the demand for political and economic freedom as a key causal force behind the movements. Leaders in Saudi Arabia learned that cash payment can curtail similar protests, while the poorer Syrian leaders have been unable to purchase the same loyalty. Meanwhile, reactions from the militaries have been quite unpredictable. While the militaries in Bahrain and Syria remained loyal, the militaries in Tunisia and Egypt eventually withdrew support from their governments, and the militaries in Libya and Yemen split their support between the government and the protestors. Though perhaps unpredictable, it is clear that the militaries played crucial roles in the outcomes of the uprisings. Loyal militaries have allowed the governments in Bahrain and Syria remain intact, regimes in Tunisia and Egypt fell after military defections, and military splits led to prolonged fighting in Libya and Yemen. While drawing robust inferences from this small set of cases is impossible, understanding the role of the military in democratic transitions in a broad sense is apt to help us better understand both past, current, and future events. What is clear is that the military plays a crucial role in the survival of embattled leaders. What is less clear, and what we hope to illustrate, is the role that militaries can play in the democratization process when authoritarian leaders are removed via a coup d’état.

Many examples in recent history can attest to the important role the military has played in major regime transitions. Huntington’s (1991) *The Third Wave* begins with a vivid discussion of the Portuguese military’s role in overthrowing Europe’s oldest dictatorship via a coup d’état. 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) later 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. Current US policy mandates the suspension of aid in the event of a coup, for example, ranging from military assistance programs to the Peace Corps.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> Within a week of the overthrow of Honduran President Zayala (2009), for example, the OAS voted unanimously to suspend Honduras, the World Bank froze economic aid, France and Spain recalled their ambassadors, and Venezuela put its military on alert for a potential invasion (Weissert 2009; CNN 2009). Such policies are now commonplace among both states and international organizations. Given that the coup in Honduras was only one of 459 coup attempts since 1950 (Powell and Thyne 2011), it is absolutely necessary that these policies are founded on strong theoretical and empirical grounds.

While anti-coup policies confront the fact that coups are major threats to fledgling democracies, responses such as those levied against Honduras discount the possibility that coups might promote or protect democratization in the long run. This is puzzling given that the bulk of

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<sup>1</sup> For relevant documentation, see Section 513 of the Foreign Operations, Export Financing, and Related Programs Appropriations Act (1993) and Section 608 of the Fiscal Year Consolidated Appropriations Act (2008).

<sup>2</sup> For relevant documentation regarding the OAS, see Resolution 1080 (1991) and the Inter-American Democratic Charter (2001). Regarding the OAU/AU, a resolution condemning coups was a product of the 1997 African Unity Summit in Harare, the 1999 Algiers declaration, and the 2002 AU charter (Piccone 2004:25; Ould-Abdallah 2006:23).

coups do not happen within democracies, giving most coup leaders little democracy to undermine. Collier (2008, 2009) recently mounted a counter-charge to widespread policies of condemning coups, arguing that coups are likely the best approach to removing staunchly authoritarian dictators like Zimbabwean President Mugabe or Burmese General Shwe.<sup>3</sup> Though we lack Collier's optimism, noting that coups have caused a plethora of societal ills (e.g., civil war in Algeria, 1991; ethnic strife in Sudan, 1989), we also recognize that some shock is almost always necessary to budge staunchly authoritarian regimes off their continued path of repression. Coups may provide this shock, opening a window of opportunity for the promotion of democracy. At the very least, the long history of puzzling and contradictory reactions from the international community to coups suggests a need for a careful and systematic analysis of the impact of coups on democratization.

While we wholeheartedly agree with claims that coups are bad for democratic stability (Onwumechili 1998; Kieh and Agbese 2005), in the following pages we focus exclusively on authoritarian regimes to explain how coups might bring about democratic transitions. The theory is followed by empirical tests examining how coups influence the likelihood of democratic transitions from 1950 to 2008, which provides strong support for our expectations. We extend the analyses by examining which authoritarian states are most likely to democratize following a coup. Our results indicate that both strongly authoritarian leaders and leaders who have maintained power for a long time—those least likely to democratize otherwise—become the most likely to democratize when their leader is challenged with a coup. We conclude by summarizing our study, outlining policy recommendations, and pointing to fruitful areas for future research.

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<sup>3</sup> 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.

## CONCEPTS AND PUZZLE

Though we remark on the broader process of democratic consolidation later in the article, our primary theoretical focus is on the initial transition to democracy, or democratization. By “democratization” we mean the initial transition from an authoritarian to a democratic state—a process that is also commonly referred to as “democratic transition” (e.g., Feng and Zak 1999). This is different than democratic deepening or democratic consolidation, which refers to the longer process by which democracy comes to be the “only game in town” (Przeworski 1991: 26). It is also different than examining the static level of democracy or year-to-year changes in democracy levels over time (e.g., Burkhart and Lewis-Beck 1994), as we are uninterested in minor transitions (e.g., from strong to weak authoritarianism). Consistent with our theoretical concept, our empirical analyses focus on the initial transition to democracy, which is operationalized as the year in which an authoritarian state went beyond +5 on the Polity IV index (Marshall and Jaggers 2000). The crucial point here is that both our theory and empirical model speak not to minor changes towards democracy, but to initial transitions to full democracy. This is important because in a highly authoritarian state like North Korea, we might expect any dramatic event (e.g., natural disaster, foreign invasion) to increase the level of democracy simply because further authoritarianism is essentially impossible. Setting the threshold for democratization at a very high level—full democratic transition—focuses our theoretical and empirical attention on how coups might make dramatic differences in a state’s regime type, assuring that coups are not simply acting as a proxy for one of many dramatic events that might inevitably cause a shift in the level of democracy.

As alluded to in the introduction, our puzzle comes in the disconnect between anti-coup policies established by states and IOs and the prospect that coups might promote

democratization. While establishing anti-coup policies to protect democracies is noble, the reality is that the minority of coups actually happen in democratic regimes. In Figure 1 we present histograms of pre-coup Polity IV scores for all states that have experienced a coup since 1950. We see that only 16.9% of coups happen within regimes scored above +5 (a common threshold for defining democracy), and the plurality of coups happens in the staunchly authoritarian states coded below -5 (44.2%). This suggests that coups as threats to regime survival are far more of a consideration for authoritarian regimes than for democracies. Considering what happens in the post-coup political environment provides even more compelling evidence against anti-coup policies as mechanisms to promote democracy. In Figure 1b, we plot the average trajectory of democratization for all states that have experienced a coup attempt from 1950 to 2008. The results are striking. Instead of increased authoritarianism as conventional wisdom might suggest, we see that within a few years the mean polity score following both successful and failed coups has recovered to the pre-coup levels, if not improved.

[Figure 1]

Though the descriptive statistics presented here provide nothing conclusive, they provide at least some evidence pointing to a disconnect between policy trends and reality. While policies condemn coups to protect democracy, in reality coups are much more likely to target non-democracies, and perhaps act as catalysts for democratization (or, at the very least, are unlikely to deepen authoritarianism). This disconnect has paramount real-world consequences. Current policies would have likely condemned the April 1974 Portuguese coup, perhaps spoiling the third wave of democratization. They might 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 DEMOCRATIZATION**

In order to understand how coups might lead to democratization, it is necessary to begin with a precise definition of coups. 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, 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, 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. 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 2011:252).

Beyond defining coups, scholars have consistently identified three conditions that make a coup attempt most likely.<sup>4</sup> 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

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<sup>4</sup> We focus here on the three conditions that have consistently been identified to have strong theoretical and empirical relationships with coups from past literature. This neglects dozens of factors that have been posited in past work that have subsequently found weak theoretical or empirical support. See Zimmerman (1983) for a strong (albeit dated) review of factors not addressed here.

“invite coups [with] popular approval,” which is supported by a plethora of work (Galetovic and Sanhueza 2000; Londregan and Poole 1990; Janowitz 1977; Belkin and Schofer 2003; Johnson, Slater and McGowan 1984; Thyne 2010). Likewise, widespread discontent over governmental legitimacy frequently precipitates coups, most often in the form of mass riots, protests, or strikes (Sutter 1999, 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.”

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, exile or 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, ordering his troops 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 abolished its army following a coup attempt (Finer 2002), while Kenya dismissed virtually every Air Force officer following a failed attempt (N’Diaye 2002). Additionally, we recall that coup perpetrators must come from either the military or other elites in the state apparatus—people who enjoy a privileged status in society. Thus, leaders seeking a regime change 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 the status quo.

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 arise frequently when the coup plotters have genuine goals of creating 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—all of which are strongly tied to democracy. 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.

The relationship between Paraguay and the United States during the 1970-80s helps demonstrate this process. During the 1970s, the relationship between these states faltered due to President Carter's concern with human rights abuses under the Stroessner regime. Economic transactions were minimal during this period, and continued to be strained in the Reagan presidency. The nadir of US-Paraguay relations came in 1987 with Reagan's executive order to suspend Paraguay from receiving benefits through its membership in the Generalized System of Preferences. Similar policies isolating Paraguay from regional states and IOs had many calling Paraguay "an island surrounded by land" (Brooke 1989). A successful coup led by General Rodriguez in February 1989 marked an abrupt turning point for Paraguay. The coup was met with a strong positive reaction coming from both states and IOs within the international

community, including the US (Xinhua 1989). While dramatically improving the state's human rights record, over the next three years the ruling regime instituted full democracy in Paraguay, spurring a dramatic increase in foreign investment and economic growth.<sup>5</sup>

Regarding political legitimacy, we should expect many 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).<sup>6</sup> 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.

Though the examples of Paraguay and Mali certainly support our argument, we are mindful that there are a plethora of cases where coup leaders chose to personalize the regime and consolidate power following a coup. Rather than being egregious anomalies, though, previous

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<sup>5</sup> During the Stroessner regime, Paraguay was consistently scored -8 on the Polity IV scale, placing it in the strong authoritarian category. In the decade prior to the coup, Paraguay had a very modest economic growth rate of 3.9% (1979 to 1988) and its trade levels were among the lowest in South America. Within 5 years of the coup, GDP/capita had grown by 10% (Gleditsch 2002) and its trade had more than doubled (Barbieri 1998)

<sup>6</sup> The cyclical nature of coups is surely not lost on the leaders helping institute the anti-coup norm explained earlier, we suspect, particularly given that the AU has been chaired by three coup-plotters (Gadhaffi, Obiang, and Sassou-Nguesso) over its short existence.

work suggests that coups motivated by individual self-interest are rarer than one might expect. There is little systematic evidence that coup leaders (particularly among the military ranks) have an interest in running the country or instituting reforms to assure that they receive a larger part of the budgetary pie. For instance, Thompson (1973) 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. Geddes (1999:123) perhaps provides the clearest explanation in this regard, explaining 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.” Based on this work, we should be unsurprised when coup leaders opt to turn over leadership as soon as a legitimate government can be put in place given their lack of ambition for continued rule.

A handful of more recent coups continue to shed light on our argument. For example, Niger tells us a story regarding potential penalties for attempting to personalize power. After ousting President Mahamane Ousmane in 1996, Colonel Ibrahim Mainassara Baré assured the public that civilian rule would be restored once the political and economic chaos had subsided. Baré retreated from this promise, quickly winning rigged elections and consolidating the shift to a presidential regime. His 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 immediately pledge to hold elections within two years, fully isolating themselves 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 2009).

Taken together, these cases suggest that installing a democratic system is a clear route available to coup leaders to establish a legitimate government and to assure international support for the new regime. More broadly, our argument is consistent with work contending that democracies have greater domestic legitimacy than their authoritarian counterparts (e.g., Chu et al. 2008), are less likely to experience either coups or civil wars (Lindberg and Clark 2008; Hegre et al. 2001), and work promoting the importance of entering the democratic community for the survivability of the regime (Kadera, Crescenzi and Shannon 2003; Pevehouse 2002; Dunning 2004). Though history is unfortunately replete with examples of coup leaders who chose to consolidate their power and continue authoritarianism following a successful coup, many others have chosen to enact meaningful reforms towards democratization—reforms that would have been wholly unlikely in the absence of a successful coup. This discussion leads to the following hypothesis:

*H1: Successful coups within authoritarian regimes should increase the likelihood of democratization.*

We also expect failed coups to increase the likelihood of democratization, though through a 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 elites within the state serves as a 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. Given that a state's previous experience with even failed coups is a consistent predictor of future activity (Belkin and Schofer 2003), 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; Powell, forthcoming). Though common, 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; Svulik 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. 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 frequently consider 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. While opening the political process will likely put a leader’s *political* survival in peril, it affords him the opportunity to negotiate a privileged position in the government, retire with his life and

livelihood, or at least survive in exile. Doing otherwise puts both the leader's political and physical survival in peril, as coups can turn bloody and assassination attempts are frequent.

We see the democratization pattern played out following many failed coups over recent decades. 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 were clear signals. 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.<sup>7</sup> Though it is clear that many authoritarian leaders choose to cling to power until removed forcefully, even in the face of credible signals from within their regime, we expect meaningful reforms to become more likely when a leader is challenged with even an unsuccessful coup attempt. This discussion leads to our second hypothesis:

*H2: Failed coups within authoritarian regimes should increase the likelihood of 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

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<sup>7</sup> As expected, Kaunda's fall from power left him in a reasonably secure position. A weak attempt to punish Kaunda by having him declared stateless failed, and today Kaunda works to fight the HIV/AIDS pandemic. He travels broadly, and was recently seen in attendance at an episode of *Dancing with the Stars*.

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, democratization, is coded 1 in the year in which the state was coded +6 or greater on the Polity IV index.<sup>8</sup> 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 authoritarian spell.<sup>9</sup> With this set-up, positive coefficients indicate an increase in the likelihood of democratization, while negative coefficients suggest 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. These authors re-evaluate coup events reported in over a dozen earlier scholarly works and media outlets to code coup events from 1950 to 2010. Given that our unit of analysis is yearly for authoritarian states, we eliminate all democratic country-years and collapse

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<sup>8</sup> 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 of Polity. See Appendix Tables 1-4 for results using alternative specifications.

<sup>9</sup> 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. See Appendix Tables 5-6 for alternative specifications of the estimator.

authoritarian country-years with multiple coups into a single yearly value. This includes 340 coup attempts, 190 of which were successful.<sup>10</sup> We 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 following 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.<sup>11</sup> 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 democratization.

### ***Control Variables***

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.<sup>12</sup> Our first set of measures attempt to capture historical conditions that are likely to increase democratic transitions. *Previous democracy* is coded 1 if the state had any experience with democracy since 1800 (the beginning of the Polity dataset). 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

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<sup>10</sup> According to Powell and Thyne (2011:252), a coup is considered successful if the perpetrators “seize and hold power for at least seven days.”

<sup>11</sup> 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, simply lagging the measure at 1-3 years, 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. See Appendix Tables 7-8 for alternative specifications of the primary independent variables.

<sup>12</sup> In addition to the control variables that appear in Tables 1-2, we analyzed many additional 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 findings. Thus, we present the most parsimonious model possible. See Appendix Table 9 for results with an expanded list of control variables.

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). The third variable, *Year of independence*, is the year that the country became independent (or 1800 if earlier). We expect fledgling states to be less apt to transition to democracy as leaders attempt to consolidate control of the regime. 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. 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 democratization. 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 democratization 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 ( $p < .016$ ).<sup>13</sup>

[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 2. Figure 2 displays how we should expect the likelihood of democratization to vary when each independent variable is allowed to vary from its 25<sup>th</sup> to 75<sup>th</sup> percentile for continuous variables and from 0 to 1 for dichotomous variables while holding all other variables constant (means and modes).

[Figure 2 here]

We first see that the variables capturing coup attempts, whether successful or failed, provide substantial leverage in our ability to predict democratization. In the absence of coups, the likelihood of democratization is around .0048.<sup>14</sup> 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 democratization 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.

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<sup>13</sup> 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 ( $p < .069$ ).

<sup>14</sup> 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).

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 democratization 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 25<sup>th</sup> to 75<sup>th</sup> 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 25<sup>th</sup> to 75<sup>th</sup> percentile (2.67 to 3.39, *ln* values) in this measure increases the likelihood of democratization 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.

## **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 view coups within authoritarian states as opportunities to promote democratization. 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 findings become much more interesting and 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 3 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 3a 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 3b and 3c, 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 (those near the democratic threshold). Taken together, Figures 3a-3c 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 3 here]

The second row of Figure 3 presents histograms of the duration that the executive has been in office prior to democratization.<sup>15</sup> 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 3d. 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 3e; 77.6% for successful coups in Figure 3f). 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 3d-3f

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<sup>15</sup> Data for executive tenure come from the Database of Political Institutions (Beck, et al. 2001; Keefer 2005).

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. 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.<sup>16</sup> In columns 1 and 3 we present models without the interaction terms to assure that our results are consistent with the implications from Figures 3a and 3d (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 interactive 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. The positive and significant interaction term in Model 4 indicates that coups have the strongest impact on promoting democratization when they challenge leaders who have been in office for a long period.

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<sup>16</sup> To save space, we present results for the interactions in Table 2 and Figure 4 using the combined coup measure. Results run on failed and successful coups individually yield substantively identical results. See Appendix Table 10 for interactive results using failed and successful coups.

[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 4. Figure 4a 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 3a, showing that the impact is significant for about 86% of observations in the model.

[Figure 4 here]

We plot the marginal impact of coups on democratization conditioned on executive tenure in Figure 4b. As expected, 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 democratization 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 3-4 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 initial democratic transitions, 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 is beyond our scope. 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 no coups, failed coups, and successful coups. We present descriptive statistics for these categories in Figure 5.

[Figure 5 here]

The top half of Figure 5 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. Many 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 for leaders to oust both highly repressive and long-standing dictators, and our analyses provided strong support for these propositions. Our recommendations for policy-makers are clear. First, coups should be condemned if they come against democratic regimes. Second, when coups challenge authoritarian regimes, policy-makers should view the actions as windows of opportunities to foster democratization. This does not mean that coups against authoritarian regimes should necessarily be fomented or celebrated – the long history of increased repression following coups would make such a conclusion reckless. Instead, both failed and successful coup attempts should be viewed as opportunities to urge leaders to make meaningful democratic reforms—reforms that would be quite unlikely in the absence of coup attempts. The targets of the Arab Spring uprisings clearly meet these criteria, including the now-ousted Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, Zine el-Abidine of Tunisia, Libya’s Muammar Gadhafi, Yemen’s Ali Abdullah Saleh, and the dynasties of the al-Assad and al-Khalifa families in Syria and Bahrain. And though successfully consolidated democratic governance is not assured in places like Egypt, it is clear that the ascendance of its armed forces has been far less costly in terms of both human suffering and in infrastructural damage than in war-torn Libya and Yemen, making coups all the more tolerable.

Fortunately, these policy recommendations actually coincide quite well with the language currently codified in state laws and IO agreements. 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, assistance and membership is frequently cut off regardless of path to power, as seen with the toppling of long-time military ruler Maaouya Ould Sid’Ahmad Taya of Mauritania. Taya had come to power via a coup, and maintained power

through fraudulent elections and numerous abuses of power. Yet his ouster was met with swift international condemnation from virtually every relevant international actor, including the UN, France, the U.S., and AU. While Mauritians celebrated Taya's ouster in the streets of Nouakchott, the U.S. suspended aid and the AU suspended the new government from its membership, demanding the restoration of the country's constitutional order. Such a trend prompted one observer to ponder, "Which constitutional order are they referring to; and what other option was available for peaceful change?" (Christian Science Monitor 2005). 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. Instead of automatically condemning coups, policy-makers should view coups in authoritarian states as critical windows of opportunity to foster democracy.

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 Zimbabwe 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 one of many shocks that might open up a path towards democracy. Future research might further probe the characteristics of states that are apt to democratize following a coup, perhaps focusing on relationships with external actors, economic stability, or domestic protests. Likewise, our theoretical argument and empirical tests focus solely on democratization, leaving aside the potential for coups within authoritarian regimes to lead to increased authoritarianism and repression. A better

understanding of when and how coups might lead to either democratization or further authoritarianism would dramatically improve our understanding of the consequences of coups, and would provide clearer policy recommendations than we can provide here.

In a more general sense, we know surprisingly little about how other paths to democracy take place, particularly those that are amendable to external pressure. President Bush's invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq were clearly cloaked in terms of democracy-promotion, as have 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 and most effective options for democracy promotion, much more work is needed to provide robust conclusions. We hope this paper serves as an important step in this direction.

Figure 1. Pre- and Post-coup Political Environments, 1950-2010

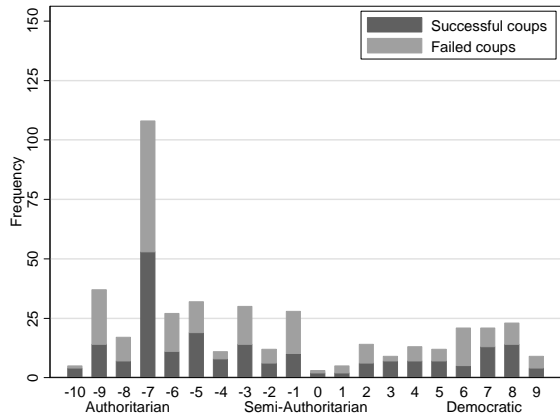


Figure 1a. Pre-coup Polity scores

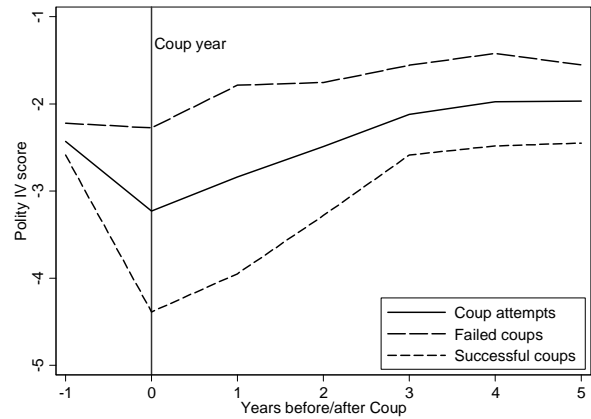


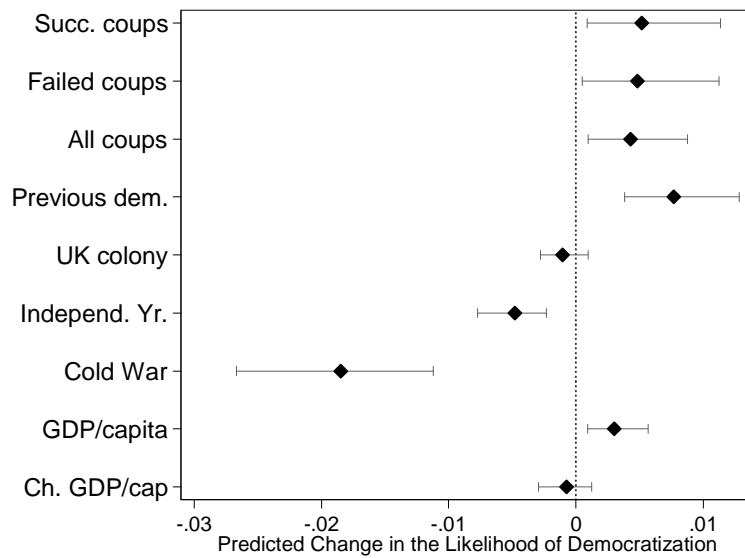
Figure 1b. Mean Polity trajectories

Table 1: The Impact of Coups on Democratization, 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 2. The Impact of Coups on Democratization, 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 3. Pre-democratization Polity and Executive Tenure, 1950-2008

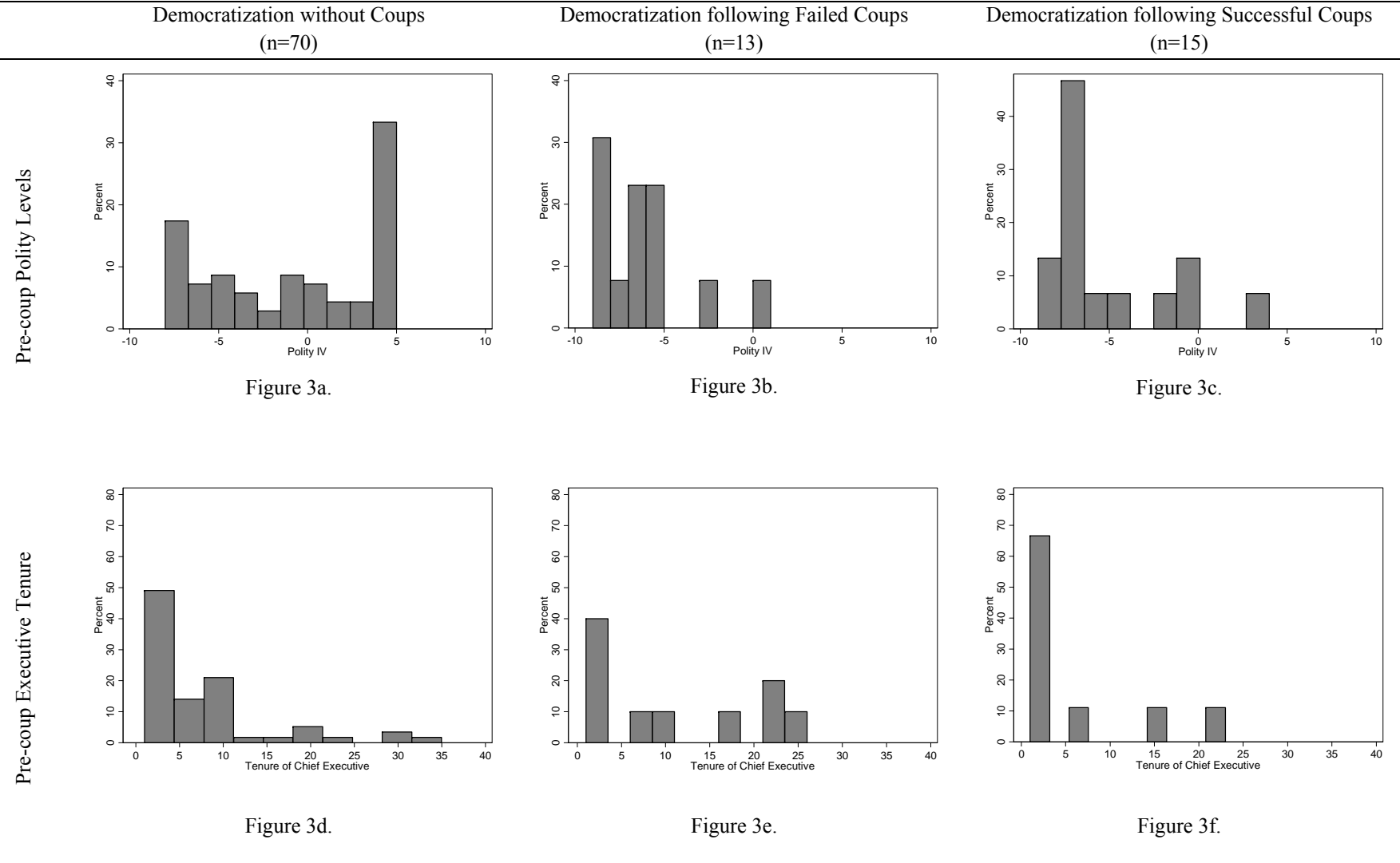


Table 2: Impact of Coups on Democratization: Conditional Effects

	(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 4. Effect of Coups Conditioned on Pre-coup Polity and Executive Tenure

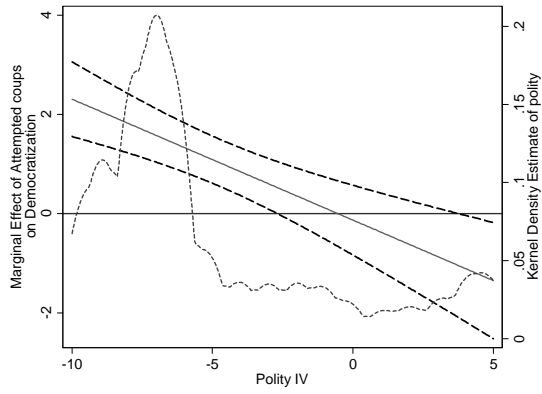


Figure 4a.

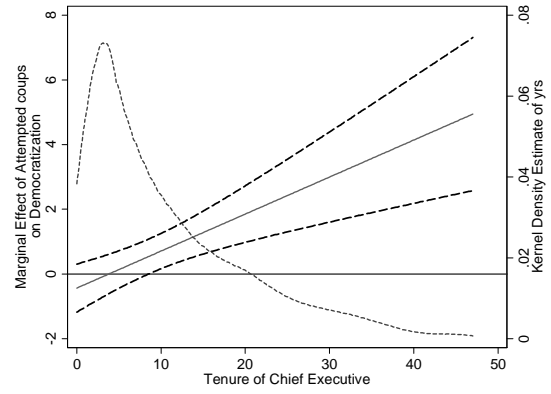
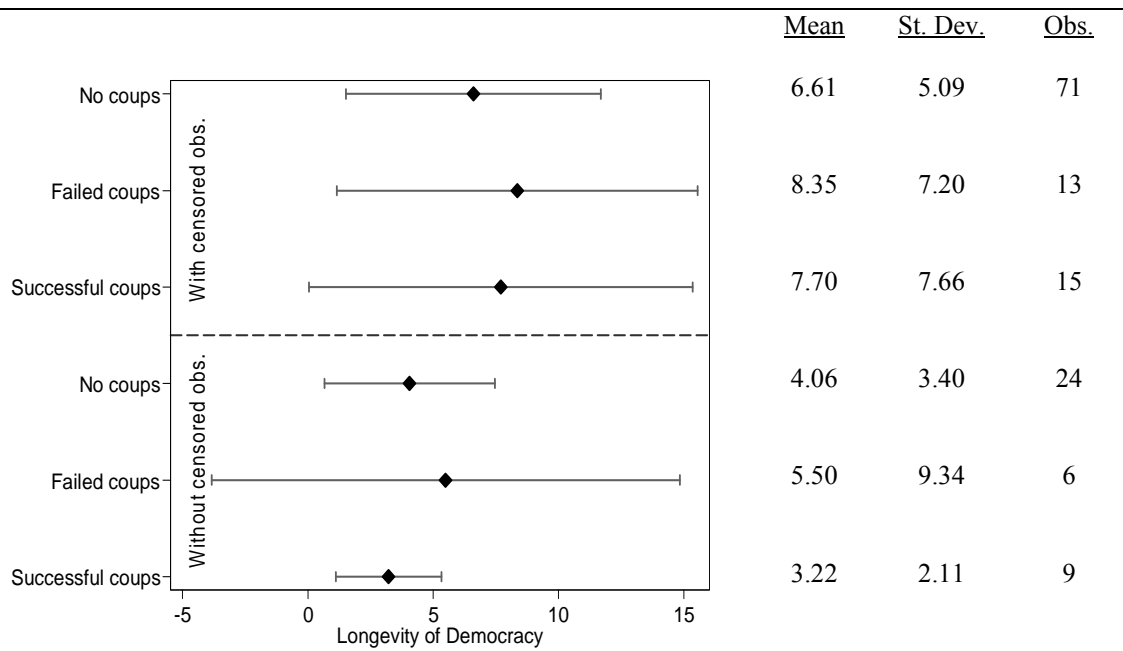


Figure 4b.

Figure 5: Longevity of Democracy, 1950-2008



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

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