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Forum: A Coup at the Capitol? Conceptualizing Coups and Other Anti-Democratic Actions

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Introduction: Revisiting Coup Conceptualizations Over Time

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On January 6, 2021, a mob of supporters of United States President Donald Trump violently stormed the U.S. Capitol Building in hope of delaying the 117th Congress’s certification of the 2020 Presidential election. The event occurred while members of Congress formalized the election’s results, which saw President-elect Joe Biden’s victory over Trump. After weeks of promoting false allegations of a rigged election, Trump and his affiliates gathered thousands of supporters at the nation’s capital to seemingly protest the results. However, following Vice-President Mike Pence’s refusal to reject the election’s results, Trump urged his supporters to march upon the Capitol Building. The situation dissolved into chaos as his followers overwhelmed Capitol police units and violently breached the building. As members of Congress were escorted into hiding places, rioters stormed into the Senate hall, proclaiming their desire to overturn the election, and called for violence against “treasonous” lawmakers. Members of the National Guard were eventually deployed, and the rioters were removed from the Capitol Building.

While this attack did not successfully overturn the 2020 election results, it did prompt a serious discussion in public and academic discourse about the event’s label. Namely, did the Capitol’s storming constitute an attempted coup d’état? This discussion presented a disconnect between the use of the term by the public and media on one side, and scholars of contemporary coups on the other. This introduction to the forum provides an overview of the term’s development over time and its usage in contemporary social science. Specifically, we explain that while today’s narrow definitions have allowed scholars to focus on the causes and motives of explicit “coup events,” other important political events—many of which historically fell under the label of coups—are increasingly disregarded as being beyond the conceptual scope.

Conceptualizing Coups

That there would be a debate about the use of the term is unsurprising, as various forms of political acts from a broad range of actors have fallen under the label. The earliest serious conceptualization comes from the work of French scholar Gabriel Naude during the seventeenth century. Naude identifies coups as “bold and extraordinary acts that princes are forced to undertake in difficult and hopeless matters, contrary to common law and regardless of any justice, putting the particular interest at stake for the benefit of the general one” (1639: 103). In contrast to coups being undertaken directly against the state, this approach referred to actions undertaken *by the state* for what was argued to be the common good. Perhaps most notably, the label was applied to King Louis XIII’s 1628 military actions against the Huguenots at La Rochelle. Thus, in the mind of Naude (1639), the “bold and extraordinary acts of princes” were not meant to undermine current authority, but rather to preserve it.

Importantly, this approach is similar to modern uses in that the action is undertaken by the state but departs from contemporary use in that it does not seek to overturn an incumbent. Indicating common usage in English, the Oxford English Dictionary incorporated a definition of “a sudden and decisive stroke of state policy; a sudden and great change in the government carried out violently or illegally *by the ruling power*” (Rapaport 1966). However, the term’s use would see a dramatic shift in usage after the French Revolution. Instead of capturing efforts by royals against their opponents, the term began to be used to capture acts undertaken both by and against a regime’s political leadership. In France alone, the term would be used to describe events as diverse as General Napoleon Bonaparte’s seizure of power from the Directory in November 1799, Claude Francois de Malet’s October 1812 effort to oust Napoleon, Napoleon’s return to power from exile, and Napoleon III’s dissolving of the National Assembly in December 1851.

Rapaport (1966) concludes that by the third edition of Webster’s International Dictionary (published in 1961), the term coup had come to capture a “sudden decisive exercise of localized or concentrated force unseating the personnel of government,” thereby “reversing the definitional order.” However, this evolution occurred quite earlier, with at least the 1907 version of the dictionary defining a coup as “a sudden, decisive exercise of power whereby *the existing government is subverted* without the consent of the people.”

The twentieth century, of course, saw the evolution of scholarly approaches to studying coups (see Table 1). As with earlier common usage, academic approaches to defining coups would largely follow historical developments. Just as the French Revolution marked a shift between efforts from within the palace to efforts from beyond it, the twentieth century would see emphasis shift toward acts from the military. Finer's (1962) definition reflects the dynamics of a *military coup* during the Cold War era. Finer's focus on the military reflects the dominant approach of coup scholarship during this period, as indicated by definitions from Welch (1967), Thompson (1973), and later by McGowan (2003). This generation of coup scholars emerged in response to the waves of military coups sweeping through the Middle East, Africa, South Asia, and Latin America during the 1960's and 1970's. Given that these coups primarily saw the use of soldiers in some capacity, scholars regularly included the armed forces as the main perpetrators in their conceptualizations.

Table 1: Conceptual Approaches to Coups d'état

Source	Definition
Naude (1639)	“bold and extraordinary acts that princes are forced to undertake in difficult and hopeless matters, contrary to common law and regardless of any justice, putting the particular interest at stake for the benefit of the general one.”
Finer (1962)	“the armed forces' constrained substitution of their own policies and/or their persons, for those of the recognized civilian authorities”
Welch (1967)	“direct military intervention, aimed at unseating civilian governments and replacing them with ruling councils largely drawn from the military.”
Luttwak (1968)	“the infiltration of a small but critical segment of the state apparatus, which is then used to displace the government from its control of the remainder”
Thompson (1973)	“members of the regular armed forces remove or attempt to remove a state's chief executive through the use or threat of force.”
O'Kane (1981)	“an unexpected attack on the heart of the administration by the threat or use of violence by a small constitutional group from within the state apparatus to overthrow the government.”
McGowan (2003)	“events or attempts at events in which existing regimes are suddenly and illegally displaced by the action of a relatively small group, in which members of the military, police or security forces of the state play a key role, either on their own or in conjunction with civilian elites such as civil servants, politicians, and monarchs.”
Marshall & Marshall (2007, 2019)	“a forceful seizure of executive authority and office by a dissident/opposition faction within the country's ruling or political elites that results in a substantial change in the executive leadership and the policies of the prior regime.”
Powell & Thyne (2011)	“illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive.”
Svolik (2012)	“a forced removal of an authoritarian leader by any regime insider”
Nardulli et al. (2013)	“organized efforts to effect sudden and irregular (e.g., illegal or extra-legal) removal of the incumbent executive authority of a national government, or to displace the authority of the highest levels of one or more branches of government.”
Singh (2014)	“overt collective actions by a coalition including some portion of a country's armed forces, police, or paramilitary forces, with the intent to overthrow the government.”
Bjørnskov & Rode (2019)	“an event in which an actor or some actors previously linked to the state apparatus attempt to take power over the executive branch of the government in less than seven days.”

Though increasingly common in the context of the Cold War, an exclusive focus on the armed forces as coup perpetrators was never universal. Luttwak's (1968) definition considered

coups to be undertaken by any critical segment of the state apparatus, a view shared by O’Kane (1981). More importantly, recent scholarship incorporating global data has clearly departed from an exclusive focus on military coups. In fact, with the exception of studies aimed specifically at explaining coups from the military (e.g., Singh 2014), all recent efforts to systematically account for coups have included civilian aspects of the state.

These definitions all pose problems for attempting to impose the coup label on the January 6 event at the U.S. Capitol, at least in regard to making a meaningful parallel to other events that scholars typically refer to as coups. Importantly, each of these definitions require that coups should be undertaken against an incumbent that is currently in power. A perhaps more suitable label, often commonly invoked, is the idea of a self-coup, or autogolpe. Marshall and Marshall (2019, 3), for example, consider “auto-coups” and have clarified that Trump’s actions since the election qualify. They do, however, make it clear that these are “not considered coup events.”

Moving Forward

Conceptual clarification has allowed scholars to focus on a more specific type of event, thereby avoiding conflation of coups with other acts such as popular revolts or civil wars. This is important, as actions undertaken by different actors via different actions will likely have varying causes and consequences. However, a more nuanced approach to coups has been accompanied by a relative dearth of efforts to investigate important acts that might only narrowly miss inclusion in these definitions and a disproportionate emphasis on one of a number of forms of irregular changes of power, with coups themselves becoming less likely over time (Kendall-Taylor and Frantz 2014). Further, scholars have rarely considered the implications of these definitions beyond the confines of scholarship, despite the labeling of these events having important implications for policy.

This forum explores the challenge of conceptualizing coups at different levels. Amy Erica Smith and Lucas Borba consider the use of the coup label by the masses through the use of Google Trends data. Beyond showing the use of the concept by country and over time in the Americas, their contribution explores the inevitability of “coup” being a contested concept. They conclude that a path forward is to consider both executive removal and executive perpetuation, as well as the degree of constitutionality of an act. Drew Kinney’s contribution illustrates the

importance of coup advocacy, instances in which civilian political figures publicly call for the armed forces to step into the political fray. While perhaps not meeting a clear standard of illegality or a clear attempt to remove an incumbent, as required by contemporary coup projects, the lead up to the events on January 6 at the U.S. Capitol represent coup advocacy from important political figures. Traditional approaches to studying coups ignore such acts, potentially causing researchers to overlook critical political events.

Mwita Chacha explores the treatment of coups by an international organization, the African Union (AU). His contribution demonstrates inconsistency in the term's use within a more legalistic framework, specifically in regard to various acts falling under the AU's framework for dealing with unconstitutional changes in government. Though the AU appears to have made some gains in stigmatizing coups that target incumbents, Chacha argues the organization has selectively used the coup label while largely ignoring other elements of the framework altogether. In particular, little attention has been given to the issue of unconstitutional *maintenance* of power, precisely the type of development seen in the United States following the 2020 election. These trends are in spite of a rash of efforts aimed at extending one's tenure. In fact, recent coups both in Africa (e.g., Niger 2010; Burundi 2015) and elsewhere (e.g., Honduras) have occurred in the context of these dynamics.

Finally, this collection of essays concludes with Erica De Bruin's reflections on the stakes of correctly classifying coups and anti-democratic actions more broadly. She argues that correct classifications carry important normative and practical consequences outside of scholarship and offers ways that scholars can productively contribute to public discourse around these events.

Rethinking Coups, Autogolpes, Illegitimate Impeachments, and Sundry Other Democratic Violations: What's in a Name?¹

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A new genre of public writing has emerged: the scholarly analysis of current events to evaluate citizens' and political actors' claims that they constitute attempted "coups." The "No, not a coup" genre is booming. Just in *Washington Post's* *Monkey Cage* and *PostEverything* blogs, political scientists have recently analyzed the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in Brazil (Perla 2016; Smith 2016), the fall of Evo Morales in Bolivia (Boulding et al. 2019), and both Donald Trump's first impeachment and his attempts to overturn the 2020 U.S. presidential election (De Bruin 2020; Chin, Carter, and Wright 2019; Drezner 2019; Singh 2021). A Google search locates dozens of blog posts or popular press articles in this genre with titles playing on the line from *Romeo and Juliet*, "Would a rose by any other name smell as sweet?" Not to cede the genre to pundits, the fact-checking website PolitiFact got in on the action in the aftermath of the January 6, 2021 attack on the US capitol—but did not answer its own question (Jacobson, 2021).

What is going on? Why the public interest in alleging "coups"? What thread ties together the many events being called coups? Moreover, what explains this persistent mismatch between scholarly and popular concepts? Finally, is a more productive line of dialog possible?

To answer those questions, we begin by mapping uses of the term "coup" in public, nonacademic discourse across the Western Hemisphere, relying on Google Trends data. This analysis demonstrates that the term is applied to tremendously varying encroachments on democratic norms and procedures for possession of executive power. Contrasting public and academic vocabulary, in the second section we argue that the term constitutes an "essentially contested concept" (Collier, Hidalgo, and Maciuceanu 2006; Gallie 1955). Persistent confusion, we argue, indicates that scholars' attempts to impose a precise vocabulary fail to satisfy the ethical objectives, instincts, and (following Gallie) "exemplars" or mental models of citizens and

¹ An early version of this essay originally appeared on the *Mischiefs of Faction* blog (Smith, 2020). A technical appendix is available at XXXX.

activists, and even scholars themselves. Wide-ranging democratic violations are labeled “coups” in part because the word sounds important, egregious, and expresses outrage against violations of public sovereignty. Moreover, we argue that these normative and conceptual disagreements have influenced scholarly development of the concept to a greater extent than often acknowledged.

In light of these “essential contests,” we suggest scholars rethink communicative goals and strategies. In the third section, we outline one new academic categorization of violations of executive order that moves beyond the “coup-versus-not-coup” distinction. Specifically, we characterize violations of popular will for executive succession along two dimensions: by whether they remove presidents or perpetuate presidents in power, and by whether they use ostensibly constitutional or non-constitutional means.

Popular Uses of the Term “Coup”

What do citizens mean when they call an event a “coup”? In this section, we explore how the term is used in eighteen Latin American countries and the United States. Our sample includes a wide range of presidential hybrid regimes and low-quality democracies—places particularly likely to be sites of coups. Linguistically, focusing on the Western Hemisphere simplifies the task to three languages, two of which share common vocabulary for coups.

We analyze search data from Google Trends, as Google’s monopoly over internet searches yields a reliable measure of public interest in a specific topic. While our analysis parallels that of Marsteintredet and Malamud (2020), we analyze data from general searches, rather than scholarly publications, and we disaggregate our analysis by country. These differences reflect our interest in the use of the term in popular discourse and across contexts, rather than in scholarly communities in particular. The search data are available from 2004 onward in most of the sample, but are only consistently available from 2008/2009 onward in Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Paraguay.

Our key variable is Google Trends’ interest over time measure of the volume of searches for a specific query—in our case, *golpe de estado* for all Latin American countries (including Brazil), and *coup* for the United States. Google Trends reports search interest on a scale ranging from zero to 100, where zero indicates the absence of information. Google Trends normalizes the variable to reflect search interest over time, relative to the peak for the specified country/region and period. Therefore, in our analysis each country has a peak of 100 in one month; other

observations are relative to that peak. (See further information in our Technical Appendix.) In this short essay we focus only on the most salient peaks in each country.

Figure 1 depicts substantial variation in interest in the terms *golpe de estado* and *coups*, across countries and time. For instance, Brazilians and Venezuelans seem to have searched for information about coups across the entire period, as exemplified by numerous peaks. By contrast, Argentines, Bolivians, Hondurans, and Americans exhibited little interest in coups over most of the period, besides the few months in which searches for coups peaked. We should note that the search ended on January 11, 2021; our partial data for the month of January almost certainly reduces the height of the second peak in the US trend line.

Figure 1: Interest in the Terms “Coup” and “Golpe” Over time in Latin America

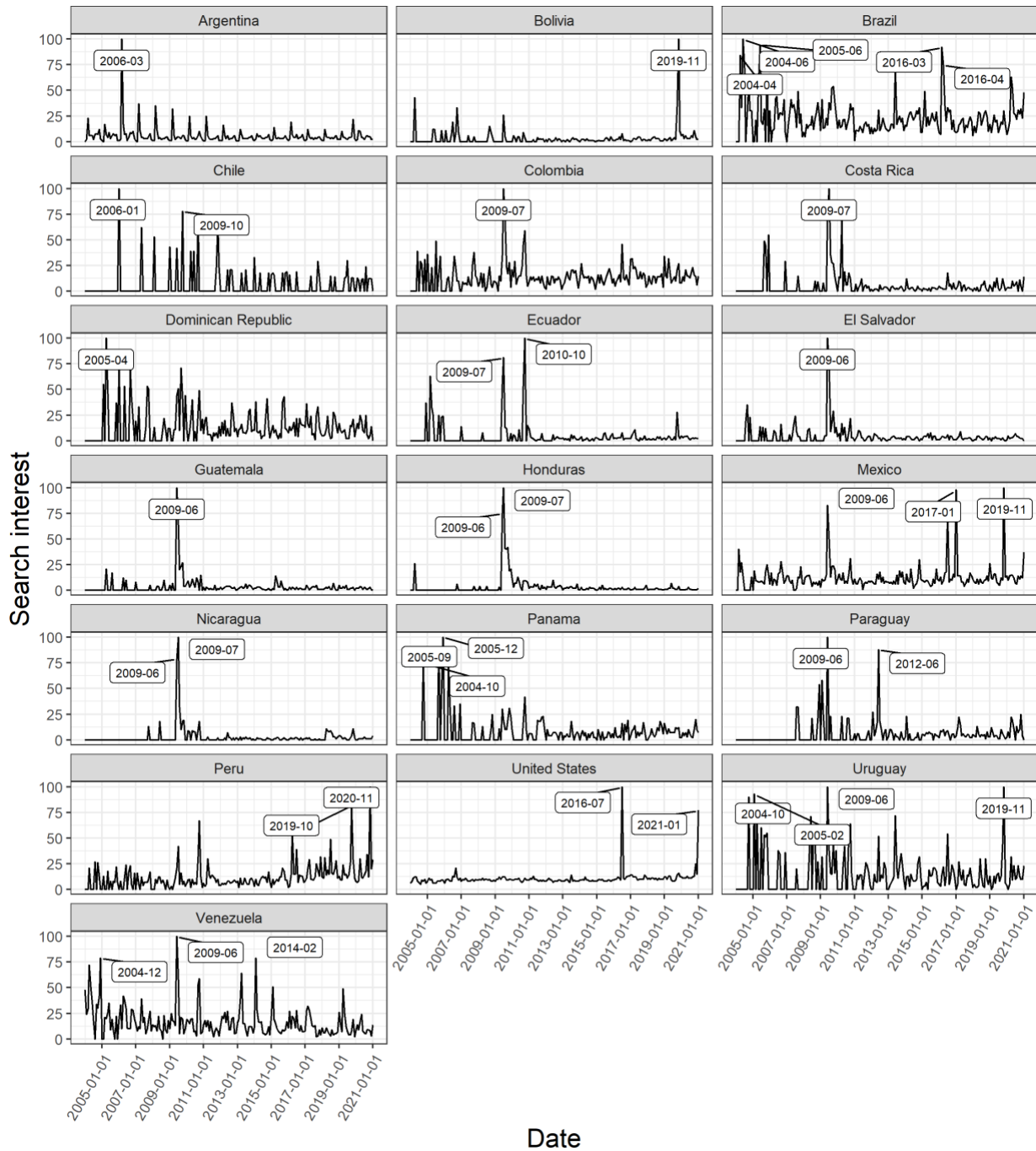


Table 2 summarizes the most salient events that awakened interest in coups in each respective country. In the Technical Appendix, we discuss how we identified the specific events of concern. To avoid tautology, we describe the events without making a judgment at present regarding whether they “really” constitute coups.

Table 2: Most Frequent Uses of “Coup” in the Americas Since 2006

Country	Date	Event
Argentina	2006-03	Anniversary of 1976 Argentine military coup
Bolivia	2004-04	Protests against natural gas exportation
Bolivia	2019-11	Protests & military intervention against Evo Morales
Brazil	2005-06	Mensalão corruption scandal
Brazil	2016-03	Impeachment of Dilma Rousseff
Chile	2006-01	Election of Michelle Bachelet
Colombia	2009-07	Judicial & military intervention in Honduras
Costa Rica	2009-07	Judicial & military intervention in Honduras
Dominican Republic	2005-04	Unclear
Ecuador	2009-07	Judicial & military intervention in Honduras
Ecuador	2010-10	Police protests and mutiny
El Salvador	2009-06	Judicial & military intervention in Honduras
Guatemala	2009-07	Judicial & military intervention in Honduras
Honduras	2009-07	Judicial & military intervention in Honduras
Mexico	2009-06	Judicial & military intervention in Honduras
Mexico	2017-01	Protests against increases in fuel price
Mexico	2019-11	Protests & military intervention in Bolivia
Nicaragua	2009-07	Judicial & military intervention in Honduras
Paraguay	2012-06	Impeachment of Fernando Lugo
Peru	2010-10	Police protests and mutiny in Ecuador
Peru	2019-10	President Vizcarra dismisses Congress
Peru	2020-11	Vizcarra’s removal on grounds of “moral incapacity”
United States	2016-07	Turkish coup attempt
United States	2020-11	Trump’s refusal to recognize Biden’s victory
United States	2021-01	Invasion of the U.S. Capitol
Uruguay	2009-06	Judicial & military intervention in Honduras
Uruguay	2019-11	Protests & military intervention in Bolivia
Venezuela	2009-06	Protests & military intervention in Honduras
Venezuela	2014-02	Protests & violent state repression

We are primarily interested in the domestic events that trigger searches. However, we note an intriguing finding at the outset: interest in “coups” is an international phenomenon; citizens search for information on other countries. For instance, in June 2009, the Honduran army removed President Manuel Zelaya, and sent him into exile in Costa Rica—a decision ratified by the Supreme Court, supposedly on the grounds that Zelaya was attempting to eliminate term limits. As we show in greater detail in the Technical Appendix, this intervention triggered months of interest in “coups” not only in Honduras, but also Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Paraguay, and Uruguay.

Another event that provoked spillovers was the “resignation” of leftist President Evo Morales in Bolivia in November 2019. Following nationwide street protests against alleged electoral fraud, as well as an army pronouncement “recommending” the president resign, Morales gave up his office and fled to Mexico. On November 11–12, 2019, interest in the term peaked in Uruguay and Mexico, two other countries with left-leaning presidents. A final example of spillover effects is the spike in interest in the United States following the 2016 foiled military coup attempt against Erdogan in Turkey.

Apart from high-profile international events, what domestic events are described as “coups” or “golpes”?² We see some references to classic military interventions, including Argentina’s 1976 military coup (prominent on its thirtieth anniversary) and, somewhat more ambiguously, the aforementioned events in Honduras in 2009 and Bolivia in 2019. However, other events not typically characterized in political science scholarship as coups also drive interest in the term, suggesting that ordinary citizens are exposed to discourse referring to them as such. For instance, a number of spikes correspond to cycles of citizen-driven protest that potentially threatened executives’ ability to stay in office, including in Bolivia (April 2004), Brazil (June 2013; see Technical Appendix), Mexico (January 2017), and Venezuela (February 2014). Ecuador’s October 2010 police mutiny and protests are somewhat more ambiguous. While police constitute security forces who might in principle unseat a president, scholarship suggests that President Correa, a would-be strongman, exacerbated the crisis but was never in danger of what political scientists would typically call a “coup” (e.g., Cleary and Öztürk 2021).

Congressional and judicial threats to executives—even threats following constitutional procedures—are also described as “coups.” The Brazilian case is notable. While social unrest in 2013 had awakened some interest in “golpes,” the highest spike in Brazil’s noisy trend line is in 2005, when the Mensalão corruption investigation arguably threatened President Lula’s presidency. Interest also peaked during the 2016 impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, removed from office for “fiscal irresponsibility.” But this phenomenon was not limited to Brazil. Paraguay’s second highest spike corresponds to the impeachment of President Fernando Lugo, removed from office in June 2012. Despite controversies, Paraguayan’s Supreme Court and Electoral Court ruled that Lugo’s impeachment was constitutional. Similarly, Peruvian President

² Table 2 includes two spikes we cannot explain: one corresponding to the election of Michelle Bachelet in Chile, and one with no clear precipitating event in the Dominican Republic in 2005.

Martin Vizcarra's removal by Congress on the grounds of "moral incapacity" led to Peru's highest spike in searches for the term "coup."

A final category of uses involves executives' attempts to expand their power. One example is Vizcarra's dismissal of the Peruvian Congress in October 2019. Another is Donald Trump's efforts to overturn Joe Biden's victory in the US: both his refusal to acknowledge Biden's victory (November 2020) and the invasion of the US Capitol two months later. Importantly, the use of the term does not appear to hinge on the constitutionality of the executive's actions. Vizcarra's dismissal of Congress arguably followed constitutional procedure, given Peru's unusual division of powers (Samuels and Shugart, 2010); Trump's refusal to acknowledge Biden's victory was norm-breaking, but not unconstitutional. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the most prominent instances of what Bermeo (2016) would call "executive aggrandizement" in the region in recent years are missing, including most of the milestones in Chavismo's gradual takeover of the Venezuelan state.

An Essentially Contested Concept

What unites these uses of the term? The popular concept evidently extends far beyond that Powell and Benhammou espouse in the introduction to this symposium, and even beyond the concept's longer historical trajectory. Table 2 includes events that political scientists would call "cycles of protest," "congressional oversight," "impeachments," "mutinies," "executive aggrandizement," and "autogolpes" or "self-coups." An alternative definition emerges from the confusion: it appears that—at least in these self-professed "democracies"—citizens use the term "coup" to refer to any interference with democratic procedures for popular sovereignty in controlling possession of executive office.

Why would citizens, pundits, and politicians corral all these different beasts within the strictures of the label "coup"? Marsteintredet and Malamud (2020, 1015) argue that the explosion of academic writing on "coups with adjectives" (for instance, compound nouns such as "parliamentary coup") is a form of "prevalence-induced concept change." The decline of "real" or traditional coups (Powell and Thyne 2011), they maintain, has led academics to stretch the concept to incorporate empirical phenomena more prevalent today. Indeed, as regional multilateral bodies and hegemons such as the United States increasingly sanction coups, domestic instability now more often takes the form of politicized impeachments, presidential resignations under popular duress, and the like

(Hochstetler 2011; Marsteintredet, Llanos, and Nolte 2013; Pérez-Liñán 2007). Moreover, most democratic backsliding today happens via mechanisms other than traditional coups (e.g., Bermeo 2016; Cleary and Öztürk 2021). Thus, we argue with Marsteintredet and Malamud (2020) that confusion over the term “coup” partially reflects conceptual drift in the currents of history. However, this explanation leaves open the question of why citizens would latch onto the term “coup,” in particular.

To explain this appropriation, we propose that “coup” is an “essentially contested concept,” following criteria laid out by Gallie (1955) and clarified by Collier, Hidalgo and Maciuceanu (2006).³ First, the term is “appraisive,” or normatively charged; its valence inverts that of “democracy,” which is likewise essentially contested. This negative valence has intensified in recent decades, as multilateral bodies and hegemons such as the United States increasingly sanction interruptions of democratic order (Arieff, Lawson, and Chesser 2020; Levitt 2006; Mitchell 2016). Second, the term is “internally complex,” “diversely describable,” and subject to “considerable modification in the light of changing circumstances,” as exemplified by this symposium as well as the forgoing discussion. Third, the concept is understood with respect to various “exemplars”—prototypical military coups of a kind more common in earlier periods. Finally, both public and academic battles involve what Collier, Hidalgo and Maciuceanu (2006, 219) term “reciprocal recognition” of conflicting conceptualizations, exemplified in public debates.

Putting these traits together, two things become clear. First, both conceptual complexity and the diversity of cultural exemplars of coups make it possible to assemble conflicting arguments about what counts as a coup. Second, under those conditions, citizens and politicians will appropriate the concept precisely because coup allegations constitute normatively charged accusations of major violations of democratic sovereignty. Other academic terms such as “executive aggrandizement” evidently fail to reflect normative outrage. In the contemporary international sphere, coup allegations serve as a call for action—perhaps for security forces to shut down protests, or for citizens to rise up against an impeachment. The temptation of conceptual

³ Here, we contradict Marsteintredet and Malamud (2020), who declare that “a coup is not an essentially contested concept like democracy or populism,” and assert “a relatively broad academic consensus on what constitutes a coup” (1021). Looking beyond academic to public discourse, dissensus is evident. Moreover, we argue that the concept’s academic trajectory exhibits less consensus than these authors suggest.

stretching will be particularly strong in a period in which democratic violations are increasingly prevalent. In the end, we academics will be unable to stop the evolution of language.

One final point bears emphasis: academic conceptualizations of “coup” are also less crisp than often acknowledged. Powell and Benhammou describe the concept’s origins in a seventeenth century definition akin to what we would today call an “autogolpe” or “executive aggrandizement” (see also Marsteintredet and Malamud 2020; Powell and Thyne 2011). In assembling their master dataset, Powell and Thyne (2011) weeded out numerous instances of autogolpes, revolutions, civil wars, etc., that prior scholars had coded as “coups.” Even today, scholars differ on questions such as the need for speed or security force involvement.⁴ The definitional requirement of illegality raises further questions, such as whether a coup is still a coup if the Supreme Court declares it constitutional (as in the case of Honduras 2009; see Marsteintredet and Malamud 2020), and whether a coup “counts” if the constitution retains tutelary powers for military intervention in domestic politics. While each disagreement may seem small, the sum leaves wide latitude for citizens, politicians, and academics to argue over whether any given incident constitutes a coup.

Is There a Way out of the Confusion?

Gallie (1955, 193) argued that scholars who recognize “a given concept as essentially contested” should accept “rival uses of it...as not only...humanly ‘likely,’ but as of permanent potential critical value to one’s own use.” We would not go so far as to argue for the “critical value” of conflicts over labeling coups. However, we do maintain that scholars should accept such conflicts as “humanly likely,” even inevitable. Citizens and political actors will use language for their own ends. Admitting that they outnumber academics on the linguistic battlefield, we suggest that academics pause to reconsider their goals. If clear communication is the objective, it may be time for a new vocabulary, at least in public writing.

We propose an alternative framework that might organize the dizzyingly varied meanings of this essentially contested concept on two dimensions. First, some interventions remove the executive, and others perpetuate the executive in power; this is, for instance, the core distinction between traditional coups and traditional self-coups or autogolpes. Second, interventions fall at

⁴ For instance, Singh (2021) declared the 2021 assault on the US Capitol “not a coup” because Trump’s calls to arms were, he claims, made in his capacity as a private citizen.

different points on a spectrum from ostensibly constitutional to overtly unconstitutional. Here, the notion of “constitutional hardball” (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018) is useful: constitutional procedures can undermine democracy, as when legislators impeach a highly popular president to escape accountability for their own corruption.

Table 3 puts these two dimensions together to categorize different ways that political elites and militaries can block the popular will regarding who holds the presidency. The table includes a middle “gray area” on the second dimension; in the contemporary era, democratic interference is often of ambiguous constitutionality. Standard academic definitions of coups are located at the top right cell. Strikingly, however, Table 2 provides examples to populate every cell, implying that democratic legitimacy is uncorrelated with constitutionality.

Table 3: Forms of Attempted Interference in Democratic Sovereignty

	Constitutional hardball	(gray area)	Overtly unconstitutional
Executive removal	“Illegitimate” impeachments & destabilizing protest (e.g., removal of Vizcarra, Peru 2020; possibly police protests, Ecuador 2010)	Democratic actors + military (e.g., removal of Morales, Bolivia 2019)	Traditional coups (e.g., Argentine military coup, 1976)
Executive perpetuation	Interference with electoral process (e.g., Trump’s attempted pressure on Electoral College, US 2020)	Executive aggrandizement (changing institutional rules) (e.g., Maduro consolidates power, Venezuela 2014–21; Vizcarra closes Congress, Peru 2019)	Traditional self-coups & overt electoral fraud (e.g., Fujimori, Peru 1992; attempted assault on US Congress, 2021)

This typology is not carved in stone; for instance, a third dimension might code whether the perpetrator is a state or non-state actor, following Marsteintredet and Malamud (2020, 1026–29). Regardless of the details, such a typology helps synthesize and communicate extant scholarship on the nature and consequences of different types of democratic interference. As just one example, history and democratic theory indicate that events in the bottom row may be more dangerous for democracy than events in the top row.

What we are proposing, then, is a change in how scholars listen and respond to citizens who allege coups. When a netizen protests against a venal legislature impeaching her president,

responding that the impeachment is “not a coup” accurately reflects mainstream contemporary academic vocabulary. However, it is not particularly enlightening; our netizen is still understandably angry. An alternative approach might side-step the coup debate, implicitly accepting the essentially contested nature of the concept—and focus instead on productive lessons from academic research. Such an approach would be bad news for the “not a coup” genre, but it might be good news for public discourse.

Conservative Coup Advocacy in the United States

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This essay draws on examples of civilian *coup advocacy* in the Middle East to assess whether or not former President Donald Trump’s recent bid to subvert American democracy was a coup attempt. I argue that while Trump’s general effort to overturn the November 2020 election was not an attempted coup d’état, two discrete events within this broader effort fit within the conceptual framework of civilian coup advocacy. The first instance was retired General Michael Flynn’s and Trump’s December 2020 suggestion to invite the United States military into a civilian political dispute. The second instance of civilian coup advocacy was the storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. However feeble an effort, I argue that the Capitol storming was a civilian-led coup attempt incited by ex-President Trump and other prominent conservatives. Not all contributors to this roundtable agree with the categorization of the Capitol storming as a coup attempt. This is only partly due to definitional differences. Disagreement about how to define the event reveals crucial differences in how scholars of coup politics approach the subject.

The analytical discussion in this forum is helpful insofar as it clarifies scholarly concepts and does not hinder efforts to salvage democratic institutions in the face of anti-democratic movements (De Bruin 2020). For this reason, this essay emphasizes that conservative *civilian* elites aligned to the Republican Party are the biggest threat to American democracy—not the U.S. armed forces. Conservative coup advocates, in particular, are paving the way for future coups by undermining the norm of civilian supremacy over the armed forces. They do so by telling their constituents that in *exceptional* circumstances the army’s assistance is *crucial*, not

forbidden. Conservative elites have also been politicizing the police and military and nurturing an alliance with non-state para-military organizations, like the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys. This behavior is an expected response to two conditions—*polarization* and *perceived electoral disadvantages*—that have produced high rates of civilian coup advocacy in the Middle East. The following section discusses these conditions and argues that they are now present in the United States.

Polarization, Election Fears, and Conservative Coup Advocacy

Civilian *coup advocacy* is the willing promotion of a coup d'état in support of a wider political cause. Civilians in the Middle East have tended to advocate for coups under the conditions of *high polarization* and *perceived electoral disadvantages* (see Kinney 2019). This toxic combination has reached American shores. The U.S. electorate and Congress is polarized (Neal 2020; Webster and Abramowitz 2017). As a result, conservative civilian elites have grown unwilling to countenance the rule of their liberal counterparts.⁵ They would rather the country be governed by conservatives in fatigues than liberal elected officials. Add to this that America's conservatives fear they cannot fairly compete in an electoral contest (Badger 2020). While Republican electoral prospects are surely waning, due to the party's unpopularity (Astor 2020), the country's electoral machinery functions properly. The problem is that conservatives *believe*—rightly or wrongly—that the odds of victory are stacked against them. Backed into the corners of their minds, the Republican Party has turned to extra-legal tactics, especially voting restrictions (e.g., Bacon Jr. 2020). This effort has expanded to include drawing the armed forces into politics—a typical trajectory for coup advocates. After backing Iraqi General Bakr Sidqi's coup in 1936, for instance, politician Hikmat Suleiman said, “There was nothing left for us except the Army...so we resorted to the Army” (as cited in Tarbush 1982, 121). In sum, if American voters will not give conservatives the keys to the White House, they will force themselves in at gunpoint.

The Flynn-Trump Plot: A Case of Civilian Coup Advocacy

⁵ New research on “right-wing authoritarianism” supports this claim (Knuckey and Hassan 2020).

Although it did not receive as much fanfare as the U.S. Capitol coup attempt (more below), retired General Michael Flynn engaged in *coup advocacy* in December 2020 when he proposed inviting the armed forces into an overtly political role. On December 1, 2020, retired General Michael Flynn floated an idea on Twitter, on behalf of the “We The People Convention,” to declare martial law, place federal troops in swing states, and “rerun” those states’ elections. In mid-December, Flynn repeated the idea in great detail on Newsmax, a media outlet which ex-President Donald Trump had promoted to his loyal followers (Sommerlad 2020). Alarming, Trump himself then broached the plan at an official White House meeting later that week. According to *Axios* reporters Jonathan Swan and Zachary Basu (2021, 7), that December 18 meeting pitted the “conspiracists against a handful of White House lawyers and advisers determined to keep the president from giving in to temptation to invoke emergency national security powers, seize voting machines and disable the primary levers of American democracy.” During the gathering, *Overstock.com* CEO Patrick Byrne, a Trump ally, exclaimed, “There are guys with big guns and badges who can get these things [i.e., seize voting machines]” (as quoted in Swan and Basu 2021, 64). The plan was to declare a state of exception, thus giving the plotters the power to use the armed forces to settle a civilian political dispute.

Why should we pay attention to this instance of civilian coup advocacy if it did not manifest in an actual coup attempt? Coup advocates pave the way for coups by undermining the crucial norm stigmatizing the armed forces’ involvement in civilian political affairs. They do so by telling their constituents that in *exceptional* circumstances the army’s assistance is *crucial*, not forbidden. Scholars of coups tend to agree that coup perpetrators need legitimacy to subvert normal political processes (e.g., Londregan and Poole 1990; Belkin and Schofer 2003; Powell 2012; Svobik 2012; Whitehouse 2012; Casper and Tyson 2014; Grewal and Kureshi 2019). Civilian coup advocates legitimize the military’s entrance into politics by priming their constituents for a future coup. When elites call publicly for an *exceptional* maneuver (e.g., a coup) they are placing their actions within an intelligible political context. In simple terms, conservative voters cannot cheer on a coup until conservative elites explain to them why they should. In the conservative milieu, Flynn and Trump’s case for taking such an exceptional step was plain: they were rectifying an unfair electoral outcome. Such an extreme measure makes sense if one believes the election was stolen—and the failure of Trump’s legal challenges the work of sinister forces—and thus political violence is the only option left.

The Capitol Coup Attempt: A Purely Civilian Affair

The coup attempt at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, was a purely civilian operation.⁶ The first and least controversial requirement for the Capitol storming to meet the definition of a coup is that there must have been evidence the event was organized rather than the manifestation of overly-enflamed passion of a mob. Mob violence is not necessarily aimless and disorganized. On July 18, 1963 in Syria, a civilian mob of Arab nationalists led a coup attempt in which they hid and ambushed military vehicles stationed near the Radio Station and Defense Ministry (FO 371/170599, EY1015/95).⁷ With regard to the U.S. Capitol storming, federal investigators have concluded that armed extremist groups, such as the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers, carefully organized “an armed assault on the seat of American government” (Barrett, Hsu, and Davis 2021, 5-6). They led parts of the crowd to specific points of the building in order to overwhelm the police. These extremists also engaged the groups in pre-discussed chants (e.g., “Hang Mike Pence!”) designed to incite their followers to violence (Leonhardt 2021, 6). Finally, two pipe bombs were discovered—one near the Republican National Committee building and another near the Democratic National Committee headquarters (Leatherby, Ray, Singhvi, Triebert, Watkins, and Willis 2021, 9). That is an unlikely coincidence in the absence of pre-coordination.

Some definitions of coups include a clause requiring involvement by (1) state actors, and especially (2) the state’s *coercive apparatus* (e.g., Powell and Thyne 2011; Singh 2021, 2). Non-state civilian actors, however, have played prominent parts in both military (the only sub-type of coup which requires involvement by the state’s armed forces) and non-military coups (e.g., Kinney 2019; Holmes 2021, 5). On July 18, 1963 in Syria, a bloody coup attempt by Arab nationalists “consisted mostly of civilians,” apparently without the backing of state security forces (FO 371/170599, EY1015/96). It is not the type of actors involved in the operation that makes a coup a coup. What distinguishes military and non-military “coups” from “insurrections” is their aim: coups are bids for *executive* authority. The Capitol storming was not a bid to violently overthrow the U.S. regime, but rather a carefully planned attack with the singular aim

⁶ Although the event involved active duty and retired servicemembers, especially of the far-right Oath Keepers, they were acting in an unofficial capacity (Leonhardt 2021, 14).

⁷ A portion of the Damascus Military Police eventually defected to the conspirators. Some observers have speculated that members of the U.S. Capitol Police, in essence, defected to the mob on January 6, and possibly collaborated (Prothero 2021; Graff 2021).

of keeping Donald Trump in the presidency by disrupting the process by which *executive* authority would be transferred to Joe Biden (see Bennett, Brown, Cahlan, Sohyun Lee, Kelly, Samuels, and Swaine 2021).

More broadly, coups, including the Capitol attempt, often blur the boundaries between state and society. Conservative leaders and activists both inside and outside of government coordinated and incited the January 6 coup attempt. For instance, the Chair of the Arizona Republican Party, Kelli Ward, tweeted on December 19, 2020, that then-President Donald Trump should “cross the Rubicon,” (as cited in Cunningham-Cook 2021, 1-2) which can be understood not only as urging political violence but as a specific reference to Julius Caesar violating the norm of Roman civilian leaders’ supremacy over soldiers. Ward also amplified the violent rhetoric of one of the event’s main organizers, Ali Alexander, an early leader of the “Stop the Steal” movement with ties to the wealthy GOP-aligned Mercer Family. In the lead up to the Capitol storming, Alexander explicitly and repeatedly encouraged the use of violence, often within the context of imploring demonstrators to “1776” (violently overthrow) elected U.S. officials (Cunningham-Cook 2021, 2; Grim and Chávez 2021, 21; Sommer 2021, 2). Republican Representatives like Andy Biggs (Arizona), leader of the House Freedom Caucus; Paul Gosar (Arizona); and Mo Brooks (Alabama) helped Ali Alexander organize the January 6 rally despite his violent rhetoric. Although they tried to distance themselves from the event after it failed, it is worth noting that during the event Rep. Gosar posted on Parler (an alternative to Twitter) that, “Americans are upset,” alongside a photograph showing “rioters climbing the Capitol walls” (Grim and Chávez 2021, 19). There are even been credible allegations that elected GOP officials offered “reconnaissance tours” ahead of January 6 to would-be perpetrators of the Capitol storming (Cheney and Ferris 2021).

Ex-President Trump’s actions also blurred the boundary between state and non-state. While serving as Commander-in-Chief, Trump had courted extremist groups—including once explicitly endorsing the Proud Boys during a presidential debate (Ronayne and Kunzelman 2020). Based on public reporting and testimony from Trump’s impeachment trial, the ex-President was aware an armed mob was descending on Washington, D.C., clearly incited that mob, and then did nothing to stop its violence because he was pleased with their actions (Leonhardt 2021, 3; Sorkin 2021). According to GOP Rep. Denver Riggleman even claimed that President Trump’s had been in contact with “people connected to” the Capitol storming

(Feinberg 2021, 9). European intelligence officials reported immediately after the event, with a high degree of certainty, that Trump had led a “coup attempt” (Prothero 2021). Some in the mob shouted, “We are listening to your boss: Trump,” and others claimed to find moral courage from Ted Cruz, a Republican Senator from Texas (Leonhardt 2021, 13). Indeed, many in the mob were taking orders from ex-President Trump. Some shouted at police, “We are listening to your boss: Trump” (Leonhardt 2021, 13). Many who stormed the Capitol building have even adopted the “*public* [i.e., state] *authority* defense,” or in other words: “The president told me to do it” (Shamsian 2021, 6).

Conclusion

Contributors to this roundtable have put forth competing claims about whether to define recent events in the United States as a coup attempt. We all agree, however, that for students of coup politics the United States is no longer an exceptional case unworthy of inclusion in our conceptual frameworks. In this essay, I have argued that between November 3, 2020 and January 6, 2021, the United States witnessed two discrete instances of civilian *coup advocacy*: (1) the Flynn-Trump plan to draw the military into a civilian political dispute and (2) a civilian-led coup attempt at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021 meant to retain the seat of executive authority for ex-President Trump. Conservative civilian elites aligned to the Republican Party, including the former President, have undermined the norm of civilian supremacy over the armed forces, politicized the police and military, nurtured a state and non-state alliance with extremist paramilitary organizations. Their coup advocacy was to be expected in the United States’s toxic political climate.

The African Union and Unconstitutional Changes of Government

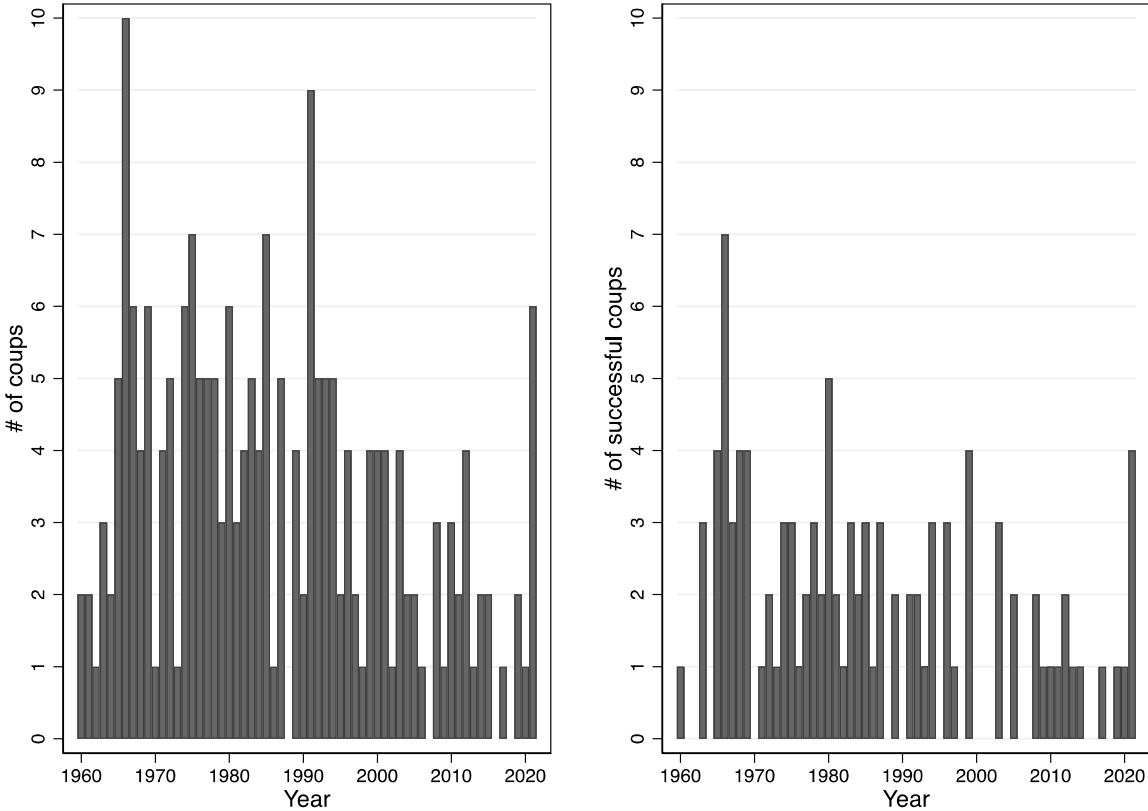
Mwita Chacha

The post-Cold War period has witnessed a decline in coups. In fact, rarely have attempts at coups been witnessed in advanced industrialized states. It was therefore surprising to many observers that on January 6, 2021 a mob of Donald Trump's supporters stormed the US Capitol with the aim of subverting the US Senate's certification of the winner of the 2020 elections. Although resembling an attempt at unconstitutionally changing a government, this storming nonetheless generated tremendous discussions on what exactly defines a coup. Such discussions are not new: In Africa, after decades of reluctance by member-states of the Organization for African Unity (OAU) and its successor the African Union (AU) to acknowledge and respond to coup events particularly during the Cold War period, several agreements were signed and ratified in the post-Cold War period with the aim of defining and responding to coups and other unconstitutional changes of government (UCG).

While this multilateral approach to defining UCG has been heralded as contributing to good governance and democracy in Africa, a closer inspection on the application of the OAU/AU policy on UCG reveals certain inconsistencies. For example, following the military coup in Zimbabwe in 2017 against Robert Mugabe, the AU refrained from calling this overthrow a coup, effectively endorsing the army's takeover. Contrastingly, the AU swiftly condemned the overthrow of Omar al Bashar in Sudan in April 2019 and suspended Sudan from the AU. This essay sheds lights on inconsistencies in the AU's definition of coups and related unconstitutional changes of government by summarizing the evolution and application of the AU's policy on UCG. This review informs the debate on how coups and other types of UCG such as the storming of the US Capitol are defined by placing focus on how international organizations approach such illegal actions. The inconsistencies of the AU's UCG policy suggest that a multilateral legalistic definition of coups and other illegal seizures of power has not settled the debate like that which followed the storming of the US Capitol. Instead, the evolution of the AU's UCG policy points at some gradual convergence among states on what are UCG and how to react to them.

Unconstitutional changes of government have been characteristic of the political history of post-colonial Africa. Figure 2 depicts the total number of attempted and successful coups in Africa between 1960 and 2021. As the figure shows, a higher number of coups were attempted and succeeded during the Cold War period. Since the 2000s however, there have been relatively fewer coup events in Africa.⁸ These post-2000s trends, as some have argued, point at the divergent policy approaches towards coups and other illegal seizures of powers that the OAU and its successor organization, the AU, have pursued. Further institutionalization of the AU’s UCG policy, specifically the threat and use of sanctions against coup-born regimes, has been argued to have contributed to fewer coups under the AU compared to the OAU.

Figure 2. Coups d’état in Africa, 1960-2021. Source: Powell & Thyne (2011)



For most of its existence, the OAU did not have a specific policy on how to respond to UCG. Instead, the OAU relied on Article 3 of its founding charter that outlined the

⁸ The exception is 2021 that has witnessed six coup attempts and four successful coups.

organization's core principles. These principles included "Non-interference in the internal affairs of States." The principle of non-interference came to characterize much of the OAU's approach to coups and other illegal power seizures. Omorogbe (2011, 126) point out that although "the OAU condemned violent coups and assassinations of political leaders as unlawful under the OAU Charter", the organization nonetheless "usually accepted whichever government was in effective control of the territory and allowed that government to represent its state within the OAU."

The end of the Cold War marked a turning point for the OAU and its policy towards UCG. Through two agreements promulgated during the latter years of the OAU and one agreement following the establishment of the AU, a clearer policy on how to respond to coups and other UCG has been articulated. The first of these agreements was the 1999 Algiers decision on unconstitutional changes of government. The Algiers decision called on a return to constitutional rule in those countries that had experienced illegal power seizures since the 1997 Harare Summit (Algiers 1999). It further empowered the OAU Secretary-General to be actively involved in facilitating a return to democratic governance in those countries that had experienced unconstitutional power changes (Algiers 1999).

Further clarity came in the second agreement, the 2000 Lomé Declaration on the Framework for an OAU Response to Unconstitutional Changes of Government. The Lomé Declaration defined what constitutes an unconstitutional change of government and guidelines on what actions the OAU was to take following such illegal power changes. UCG, according to the Lomé Declaration, included coups against democratically elected governments, power takeovers orchestrated by mercenaries, armed rebels and dissident groups replacing democratically elected governments, and incumbent governments that refuse to voluntarily give up power following electoral defeat (Lomé 2000).

Moreover, the Lomé Declaration laid out two sets of measures the OAU Central Organ was to take in the event of UCG. The first step involved condemnation of the act, suspension from participating in substantive decision-making in the OAU, and a six-month deadline for the perpetrators to "restore constitutional order" (Lomé 2000). During this six-month interregnum, the Secretariat General was urged to use diplomatic pressure and collaborate with other member-states and regional bodies to facilitate a return to constitutional rule. The second step was an escalation of the situation in the event of no progress having been made to restore the rule of law.

Alongside the initial suspension, targeted sanctions were to be deployed that included visa restrictions, limited diplomatic contacts, and trade embargoes. The declaration called on the OAU Secretariat to coordinate its sanctions regime with member-states, regional organizations, and other international actors.

Emerging at the twilight of the OAU, the Lomé Declaration has continued to inform the African Union's approach to unconstitutional government changes. The Constitutive Act of AU of 2002 and the protocol establishing the AU's Peace and Security Council (PSC) reaffirmed the Lomé Declaration as the new organization's guide to dealing with UCG. Moreover, these two treaties condemned and rejected unconstitutional changes of government, required governments that acquired power illegally to be suspended, and reiterated the use of sanctions against unconstitutional governments, in line with the Lomé Declaration.

Following its establishment, the AU further consolidated its UCG policy in several agreements during its initial years. The 2007 African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (Addis Ababa Charter) that entered into force in 2012 makes several amendments to the Lomé Declaration. First, it added to the list of UCG "[a]ny amendment or revision of the constitution or legal instruments, which is an infringement on the principles of democratic change of government." Second, it authorized the AU' Peace and Security Council to respond to situations involving unconstitutional changes in government. Third, Article 25 of the Addis Ababa Charter lists sanctions and additional restrictions against perpetrators of illegal power seizures including barring them from participating in "elections held to restore democratic order" (Addis Ababa 2007).

Assessing the AU's UCG policy

Applications of the AU's UCG policy have been mixed, depending on the type of UCG. Tiekou (2009) observed that the AU has had more success dealing with coups than cases of democratic backsliding. In fact, several empirical assessments of the impact of the AU's UCG policy on coups attest to the policy's relative success. Evaluations of coup trends in Africa find that the AU's approach has contributed to a decline in the number of attempts (Omorogbe 2011; Souaré 2014; Powell 2016). These assessments attribute the AU's adherence to its UCG policy through denying recognition to coup-born regimes and the use of sanctions as having played a role in motivating fewer coup attempts since the AU's establishment. Witt (2012) concludes, following

an assessment of the AU's policy on coups that despite some challenges the AU has faced in coordinating with regional economic communities when dealing with coups, "one can observe a trend towards institutionalization and professionalization in the reactions to coups d'état."

A closer inspection of several recent coup cases however reveals inconsistencies and challenges with the application of the AU's UCG policy. The AU has at times refrained from labelling certain UCG events "coups" despite them having all the characteristics of an overthrow of a legitimate government and thus necessitating a response according to the Addis Ababa Charter. Additionally, in some cases the AU has not fully implemented its position on coups by turning a blind eye on coup perpetrators competing and winning post-coup elections. Finally, in those cases that can technically be considered attempted self-coups, where incumbents seek to extend their rule despite having lost elections, the AU has been surprisingly less forceful, letting other actors take the lead. In the proceeding paragraphs, I discuss these three inconsistencies using the cases of "forced resignations" of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi's legitimization of his coup against Mohammed Morsi in Egypt, and the refusals of Laurent Gbagbo and Yahya Jammeh to accept electoral defeats.

On 11 February 2011, Hosni Mubarak was forced to resign following mass protests. Despite having the hallmarks of a coup, the military had in fact forced Mubarak to resign, the AU did not condemn nor apply measures articulated in its UCG policy. Instead, the PSC's communique of 16 February 2011 noted that it supported the Egyptian people's desire for democracy that was in line with the AU, acknowledged Mubarak's resignation and transfer of power to the armed forces, noted the armed forces' plan to hold free and fair elections within six months, and confirmed that the AU Commission and the PSC will be monitoring the situation (PSC 2011). The AU's UCG policy was hardly applied in this case, an approach that would be repeated in 2017 following Robert Mugabe's ouster in Zimbabwe.

In other coup cases, the AU did not fully apply its UCG policy by remaining silent on post-coup political transitions that legitimized the coup plotters. Mohammed Morsi was "forced" to resign by the Egyptian army led by Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi on 3 July 2013 (Hellquist 2020). This time, the AU initiated its UCG policy by acknowledging that a coup had taken place and suspending Egypt from the AU and calling for a return to civilian rule. The AU nonetheless accepted Al-Sisi as president following his victory in the 2014 elections and lifted Egypt's suspension (PSC 2013; PSC 2014). Yet, by readmitting Egypt and accepting Al-Sisi's election,

the AU had gone against its policy of disqualifying coup plotters from competing in elections aimed to restore constitutional rule.

Beyond coups, the AU's UCG policy identifies refusals to accept electoral defeats as constituting a form of UCG that the AU would not condone. These are maneuvers that resemble self-coups. Two recent cases, Cote d'Ivoire in 2010 and the Gambia in 2016 received an AU response. Yet, while the AU did recognize these episodes in line with its UCG policy, it nonetheless let other actors play a more significant role in their resolution. In fact, the AU's approach in both cases of seeking a negotiated political solution failed to resolve the impasse. Instead, as it will be discussed, it was the threat and use of force that ultimately got the two incumbents to accept electoral defeat.

Following run-off presidential elections in Cote d'Ivoire on 28 November 2010, Cote d'Ivoire's electoral commission proclaimed opposition candidate Alassane Ouattara the winner. Despite this result being endorsed by several international observer missions including the AU, incumbent president, Laurent Gbagbo, refused to resign and instead had the Constitutional Council made up of his allies proclaim him the winner (Wallis 2010). The AU's PSC swiftly released a statement rejecting what seemed to be an attempt "to undermine the electoral process and the will of the people", labeling it a violation of the Addis Ababa Charter (PSC 2010). The AU's communique later endorsed the Economic Community of West African States' recognition of Ouattara as president-elect of Cote d'Ivoire, urged Gbagbo to immediately accept the outcome of the election, suspended Cote d'Ivoire from the AU until Ouattara was able to assume the presidency, and sought to use mediation to resolve the impasse (PSC 2010b).

However, the AU's diplomatic efforts proved futile. The political situation deteriorated as Gbagbo continued to refuse to relinquish power (Apuuli 2012). An armed struggle ensued between forces loyal to Ouattara and loyalists backing Gbagbo. Although a humanitarian crisis was worsening, the AU continued to insist on mediation and a political solution to the impasse in Cote d'Ivoire. It is in this context that ECOWAS called on the UN Security Council to authorize enforcement measures to protect civilians (Lotze 2011). The political impasse was finally resolved after Ouattara's forces had much control of the country and, in concert with UN peacekeepers and French forces, arrested Gbagbo (Abatan & Spies 2016). While the AU did respond, its approach that favored a negotiated solution turned out to be ineffective, leading other external actors, particularly the UN and France, to play a leading role in resolving the impasse.

A similar challenge to the Cote d'Ivoire crisis was experience in the Gambia in 2016. In its 1 December 2016 elections, long-time leader Yahya Jammeh surprisingly lost to opposition candidate Adama Barrow. Although at first conceding, Jammeh later rejected the result and demanded fresh elections (Fick and Pilling 2016). The AU Commission Chairperson immediately released a statement urging Jammeh to “facilitate a peaceful and orderly transition and transfer of power” and calling “the Gambian defense and security forces to remain strictly neutral” (AU 2016). The PSC later reiterated the AU Chairperson’s position and also endorsed the efforts of the UN and in seeking a solution to the political impasse in the Gambia (PSC 2016). In the meantime, ECOWAS initiated mediation efforts aimed at facilitating Jammeh’s departure from power, while also intimating their readiness to use force (Hartmann 2017).

As Jammeh persisted in his refusal to relinquish power, the PSC issued a communique on 13 January 2017 that the AU will cease recognizing Jammeh as president of the Gambia, warned of serious consequences if he continued to worsen the situation, and reiterated its support for ECOWAS’s mediation efforts (PSC 2017). With mediation making no progress and Jammeh declaring a state of emergency on 17 January 2017 (Maclean 2017), ECOWAS began amassing troops and gave Jammeh an ultimatum to leave the country or be removed by intervening ECOWAS troops (Ateku 2020). Jammeh finally resigned and left the country on 20 January 2017. Like in the Cote d'Ivoire case, ECOWAS and military force were key to the resolution of this UCG event.

Conclusion

In sum, the AU has sharpened its UCG policy, building on the post-Cold War attempts of the OAU. The policy has been particularly effective in defining what constitutes UCG and outlining several measures the AU is expected to take in case of violations of this policy. While there is evidence to suggest that the policy, through the threat and use of sanctions, has contributed to a decline in coups d'état, a closer inspection reveals inconsistencies and challenges that this essay has identified. Two cases discussed, Egypt in 2011 and Zimbabwe in 2017, suggest that the AU has at times refused use the “coup” label despite such UCG events fitting the definition outlined its policy. While it could be argued that the AU’s definition challenge was due to the two events having popular support, recent coups in Sudan in 2019 and

Mali in 2020, both of which swiftly faced AU suspensions and sanctions, undermine this hypothesis.

Additionally, the AU's UCG policy's inconsistencies can be observed in cases of incumbents' attempts and extending their rule by refusing to accept electoral defeat, the type of UCG that resembles the January 2021 storming of the US Capitol. In the two cases examined in this essay, Cote d'Ivoire and the Gambia, the AU was less forceful and instead played a complementary role to the efforts of other actors. This is unfortunate especially because such attempts at extending one's rule unconstitutionally have motivated coup attempts and civil conflict in several countries including Niger in 2010 and Burkina Faso in 2014. This lackluster response along with the inconsistencies of defining and responding to coups point at the AU's UCG policy being a work in progress, albeit an improvement from the non-existent policy of the OAU.

International organizations can contribute to clarifying what constitutes unconstitutional changes of government and, more importantly, outlining strategies member-states can take to respond to such events. Yet, the inconsistencies regarding the application of the AU's UCG policy highlighted in this essay along with other contemporary examples of international organizations' cautious approach to coups, for instance the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' response to the February 2021 coup in Myanmar, suggests that multilateral definitions and responses have not necessarily settled the debate on what counts as an unconstitutional change of government. Yet, such multilateral responses, however inconsistent, enable us to observe some gradual convergence on how states classify these illegal power seizures.

Coup, Self-Coup, Insurrection, or Riot? Reflections on the Stakes of Debates Over What to Call Trump's Efforts to Remain in Power

Erica De Bruin
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The contributions to this forum have highlighted distinctions between the concepts of coups used in academic work and by the general public, politicians, and international organizations—as well as the challenges of correctly classifying Donald Trump’s efforts to remain in power. This essay reflects upon the stakes of definitional debates.

There are analytical, normative, and practical implications to classifying an event as a coup. I argue that we have an obligation to try, to the best of our ability, to get it right—not to stretch concepts about which there is broad scholarly consensus on their meaning to fit new circumstances. Doing so undermines our ability to draw upon scholarship to shed light on the dynamics of current events. At the same time, it is important to recognize that weighing in on definitional debates may be interpreted as taking a normative stance on the relative severity of the event, even if it is not intended that way.

The debate about Trump’s efforts to remain in power illustrated some gaps in our understanding of what might be called “coup adjacent” events—those that share some features of coups but that have distinct perpetrators, targets, or tactics. This essay concludes with suggestions to address these gaps, and suggests ways in which scholars can productively contribute to public debates in the midst of continuous political events.

What Are the Stakes of Debates Over Terminology?

An accurate assessment of whether a coup is occurring matters because the tactics that work to prevent coups are different from those needed to address other types of anti-democratic actions. This is a central reason that some scholars, myself included, have argued that it matters how we classify events like the invasion of the U.S. Capitol and Trump’s broader effort to remain in power after losing the November 2020 election (e.g., Ritter and Davenport, 2021; Singh 2021, De Bruin 2020). As Smith and Borba’s contribution to this forum highlights, citizens use the term coup in a broad range of circumstances, including “illegitimate” impeachments and efforts by incumbents to interfere with the electoral process.

Yet what scholars know about coups—what causes them, how they unfold, what their consequences will be, and how to prevent them—is based on research that defines coup attempts more narrowly. As Powell and Ben Hammou describe, while scholarly usage of the term “coup”

has evolved over time, there is broad consensus that they involve a particular set of perpetrators (that come from within the state apparatus), targets (the sitting executive), and tactics (illegal, overt, and supported by the use or threat of force). Whether they succeed or fail depends crucially on how military officers choose to respond (Singh 2014; Powell and Thyne 2011). The same is not necessarily true of illegitimate impeachments or electoral interference.

The causes of coups are also distinct from those of other types of anti-democratic actions. While low levels of development and high inequality can make democracies more vulnerable to both democratic backsliding and coups, other causal factors differ (Waldner and Lust 2018; Brooks 2019). As a result, many of the “coup-proofing” tactics that leaders have adopted to prevent traditional coups cannot defend against other anti-democratic actions. As Marsteintredet and Malamud (2019, 1030) argue in their survey of the proliferation of “coups with adjectives,” conflating coup attempts with other processes “is likely to mislead causal analysis and policy prescription since when the diagnosis changes, so should the therapy.”

Yet terms like “coup,” “riot,” “insurrection,” etc., also carry with them normative connotations—even where scholars do not intend to use them in that way. In a series of survey experiments on support for coups in Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria, for instance, Grewal and Kinney (2021) find evidence of a “coup taboo,” or popular stigma about the word coup: respondents were significantly less supportive of hypothetical scenarios in which the military removed a president from power when such actions were labeled a coup.

As a result, even when scholars take pains to emphasize that other types of anti-democratic actions may be just as dangerous to democracy, classifying an action as “not a coup” may be interpreted as downplaying the situation. It is worth noting that in the case of the attack on the U.S. Capitol, this particular concern may be overblown: a Washington Post-ABC poll found that only 8 percent of respondents supported “the actions of people who stormed the U.S. Capitol last week to protest Biden’s election as president,” even though the majority of media outlets and expert commentators refrained from using the word “coup” to describe it (Clement, Guskin, and Baltz, 2021). However, labeling may have more of an effect where public opposition is not already so widespread. When scholars respond to media requests or write pieces of public scholarship on whether an event can be classified as a coup they are helping shape popular understandings—and thus normative judgements—about what occurred.

In addition to the analytical and normative considerations, there are practical consequences to correctly classifying coups and other anti-democratic actions (Marsteintredet and Malamud 2018). Regional organizations, including the Organization of American States and the African Union, sanction members that have suffered coup attempts. As Chacha's contribution to this forum emphasizes, the AU has identified a broader range of anti-democratic actions beyond coups as problematic—but, in practice, has not responded to them in the same way it has responded to coups. The United States also restricts foreign assistance to countries that have experience a coup, but not other forms of interference with democratic processes (Arieff, Lawson, and Chesser 2020). In short, there are analytic, normative, and practical implications of correctly classifying contentious events—all of which are important for scholars to keep in mind when weighing in on definitional debates.

Moving Scholarship on Coups and Other Anti-Democratic Actions Forward

The debates over what to call the attack on the U.S. Capitol and Trump's broader efforts to remain in power have highlighted the need to better map the conceptual terrain of anti-democratic actions outside of coup attempts. Smith and Borba suggests one promising way to do so; they present a typology that distinguishes forms of interference in democratic sovereignty along two dimensions: whether the goal is executive removal or perpetration, and whether the action taken are overtly unconstitutional. While the majority of coup attempts do not involve bloodshed, the threat of force has been a central component in distinguishing coups from other transitions of executive power (De Bruin, 2019). Whether force is involved may have implications for public perceptions of the event, how opposition is mobilized, and the likelihood that it succeeds.

An important step for future research involves subjecting other forms of anti-democratic actions to more rigorous conceptualization—a prerequisite for theorizing about their causes and consequences. Even self-coups are currently defined in more ambiguous and contradictory ways than traditional coups. Marsteintredet and Malamud (2018, 1026) describe self-coups as “walking up the ladder of abstraction,” by changing the target of the coup from the head of government to other state institutions, while keeping the perpetrators and means the same. Yet the perpetrator in a self-coup is not any state actor but a specific person within the state apparatus—the sitting executive. And the tactics need not be illegal; rulers can take advantage of

quasi-legal maneuvering to grant themselves authority without violating the law (Cameron 1998). What it means to target a legislature or judiciary is also somewhat opaque. Must the executive use force to physically close or capture these institutions? Replace individual legislators or judges? Or does using the threat of force to pressure legislators to vote in a particular way—as the rioters at the U.S. Capitol did on January 6—also count? Working out the answers to these types of questions is important in order to draw lessons from comparative cases.

More broadly, this debate has illustrated the need for scholars of coups and democratic backsliding to be less siloed in their research (Brooks 2019). In their review of scholarship on democratic backsliding, Waldner and Lust (2018, 95), specifically note “we understand backsliding as potentially occurring through a discontinuous series of incremental actions, not a one-time *coup de grace*.” Yet it is clear that the steps that rulers take to prolong their time in office risk provoking resistance, whether from mass protests, legislatures and courts, and/or their own political parties. As a result, support from the military and other state security forces can play an important role in facilitating democratic backsliding, even where they do not stage coups. Harkness (2017, 802), for instance, has shown that “leaders who can count on the aid of a coethnic army are both more likely to challenge term limits and more successful in so doing.” At the same time, as Kinney’s contribution to this forum emphasizes, civilian elites often play a more important role in opening the door to coups than is typically recognized—whether by engaging in overt “coup advocacy” or other, subtler, efforts at politicization of the military. More engagement between scholars of civil-military relations and democratic backsliding might further clarify the role of civilians in traditional coups (and militaries in other forms of democratic interference) in ways that deepen our understanding of how to prevent both.

Conclusions

In the midst of contentious political events, there will continue to be media demand for scholars to explain how to categorize different forms of political violence. What scholars can contribute in this moment is, by necessary, “self-consciously impressionistic,” as we attempt to combine our “(currently messy) knowledge of the literature, theory and concepts in creative and critical ways to ‘paint a picture’, or an impression, of their research subject for a wider audience” (Wood 2020, 255). We have an obligation to convey nuance and uncertainty where it exists—and to recognize the normative connotations associated with the terms we use. At the same time,

drawing appropriate lessons from existing scholarship requires us to be clear about precisely how we are defining and categorizing events. The essays in this forum represent a first step.

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