



Democratization

ISSN: 1351-0347 (Print) 1743-890X (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fdem20>

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To cite this article: Aníbal Pérez-Liñán & John Polga-Hecimovich (2016): Explaining military coups and impeachments in Latin America, Democratization, DOI: [10.1080/13510347.2016.1251905](https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2016.1251905)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2016.1251905>



Published online: 10 Nov 2016.



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Explaining military coups and impeachments in Latin America

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We develop a unified theory of presidential instability to explain why presidents are removed from office through military coups or through legal procedures. While some causal factors motivate opponents to overthrow the president irrespective of the specific mechanism employed, other factors expand the relative capabilities of groups inclined to pursue military or civilian action. The first group of variables, including economic recession, protests, and radicalization, explains why presidents fall. The second set of variables, including regional diffusion, partisan support for the executive, and normative support for democracy, explains how they are ousted. We test this theory using discrete-time event history models with sample selection on a novel database for 19 Latin American countries between 1945 and 2010.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 15 April 2016; Accepted 30 September 2016

KEYWORDS Military coups; impeachments; presidential interruptions; Latin America; radicalism

Latin American democracies have historically fallen prey to regime breakdown, specifically in the form of military coups. However, since the 1980s military coups have grown rare while legal forms of presidential removal have increased. While earlier forms of instability resulted in the breakdown of the democratic regime, the “new” pattern of political instability threatens only the president. Between 1978 and 2016, 19 constitutional presidents were removed from office through formally legal mechanisms such as impeachments, declarations of presidential incapacity, or the call for an early resignation, without a military intervention.¹

In this article we develop a unified theory of presidential instability to explain why elected presidents are removed from office through civilian or military action. We argue that some causal factors induce the formation of broad coalitions against the government, motivating opponents to overthrow the president irrespective of the specific mechanisms employed to do so. Other conditions, by contrast, empower particular actors and expand the relative capabilities of groups inclined to pursue a legal impeachment (for example, congressional leaders) or a military coup (for example, generals). The first group of variables helps explain why democratic presidents fall, while the second group of variables helps explain how presidents are removed.

For example, a radical opposition mobilized against the president is likely to conspire in order to terminate the administration. Such conspiracies may involve military or

civilian allies, depending on the historical context. However, political actors are constrained by domestic conditions and broader regional trends, as well as their own commitments to democracy. In the past, when few countries in the region were democratic, military action against the president was an effective path to pursue radical policy goals. After 1978, the spread of democracy in the region reduced the viability of military adventures and forced radical opponents to find constitutional mechanisms to oust presidents from office. In contemporary politics, the political cost of military action is high and alternative strategies such as congressional impeachments or social mobilization are usually a preferred course of action.

In the first part of the article we review historical patterns of political instability in Latin America. In the second section we review explanations for the ousting of Latin American presidents. An extensive literature has examined the institutional, structural, and economic determinants of military coups,² and a smaller literature looks at the causes of constitutional presidential breakdown in the region.³ With few exceptions, the literature has failed to offer a unified theory of coups and legal removals, and has not identified the common and the unique causes of each form of instability.⁴ We develop a theory linking coups, impeachments, and other irregular presidential exits. In the following section we test the argument with an original dataset of presidential exit for 19 Latin American countries between 1945 and 2010. Our conclusions emphasize the peril posed by economic crises, social protest, and radical elites for presidential stability, and suggest that presidential crises may escalate into military coups under proper historical conditions.

Presidential instability and democratic survival

Before the third wave of democratization, presidential crises often led to military intervention. Writing in 1966, Needler asserted that the coup d'état followed by the establishment of military rule was “the most characteristic feature of Latin American politics”.⁵ Fossum reported that the 20 Latin American republics had experienced 105 military coups d'état from 1907 to 1966.⁶ Almost a decade later, Lowenthal noted that, “army officers rule in more than half the countries of Latin America; in most of the rest, they participate actively in politics without currently occupying the presidential chair”.⁷ By 1977 only Colombia, Costa Rica, and Venezuela could be classified as democracies. However, since the democratization of Ecuador in 1978, military intervention and coups d'état have dropped precipitously.⁸ The risk of military coups also declined in other regions of the world after the 1980s.⁹

The “new” instability in Latin America is characterized by stable regimes with unstable presidents. Early studies focused on presidential impeachment as a novel mechanism employed to oust the chief executive,¹⁰ but forced resignations and alternative legislative procedures have also worked to remove the president while preserving constitutional order.¹¹ This instability has been widespread. Between 1978 and 2016, eight democratically elected presidents were impeached or left office anticipating an impeachment.¹² Six elected presidents resigned in the midst of a crisis,¹³ and five interim presidents were unable to finish the terms they were supposed to complete.¹⁴

Since the early 1990s, presidential instability has remained a fact of Latin American politics, but it has become less threatening for democratic survival as legal procedures to remove the president have displaced military coups. Only three presidents during this period left as a result of military intervention,¹⁵ and in one case (Guatemala in 1993)

because the middle ranks refused to support the president's self-coup. President Hugo Chávez was temporarily ousted by a military intervention in 2002, but he returned to power after two days. In no instance was a military able to establish a dictatorship.

Are contemporary forms of presidential instability functional equivalents of the old regional pattern of military coups, or are they a new political phenomenon driven by different explanations? The literature has not offered a complete answer to this question, although recent works have hinted at possible similarities between military coups and civilian replacements. Llanos and Marsteintredet labelled the new phenomenon "presidential breakdowns", establishing a parallel with old-fashioned democratic breakdowns.¹⁶ Valenzuela claimed that similar problems in the design of presidential constitutions underpin the two historical processes.¹⁷ Kim and Bahry treated coups, resignations, and impeachments as part of the same class of events.¹⁸ Most authors seem to implicitly accept that coups and presidential downfalls share some common causes.

In the following section we integrate theories on military coups and legal ousters, identifying their commonalities and differences. Even though the post-Cold War era has brought to the fore the use of legal mechanisms to remove incumbents,¹⁹ military intervention in Honduras (2009), continued military involvement in civilian affairs in Ecuador and Venezuela, and coup-proofing tactics from radical left presidents in the region indicate that the "old" era of coups may not be completely over.²⁰ Our original database of coups and impeachments in Latin America identifies 21 coups and 15 constitutional removals affecting democratically elected presidents between 1945 and 2010 – with 14 of the legal removals and only four coups since 1977.

Theorizing coups and legal removals

These facts pose important questions. What common causes underpin all forms of presidential instability, and what causes separate constitutional from unconstitutional outcomes? Why do military coups prevail in some countries and historical periods while civilian removals prevail in others? The ample literature on coups and the newer scholarship on presidential crisis in Latin America point to some answers.

The idea of "functional equivalence" between coups and legal ousters suggests that some common causes create conditions for presidential instability, irrespective of its institutional manifestation. Because they motivate a political opposition to conspire against the government, those causes explain *why* presidents are likely to fail, but not *how* they fail. At the same time, another set of causes account for the institutional manifestations of presidential instability. Those factors map into the relative capabilities of groups inclined to pursue a military coup or the legal removal of the president in particular historical contexts.

The analytic distinction between (general) motivations and (specific) capabilities helps us identify the role of different causal explanations in the literature.²¹ General motivations promote broad coalitions against the executive and expand the overall risk of presidential instability, emerging in the literature as common causes of both constitutional and unconstitutional presidential removal. Once those motivations are present, group capabilities account for specific outcomes, appearing in the literature as distinctive explanations for coups or legal removals.²² The scholarship on military coups has introduced a similar distinction between "general" structural risks, preconditions, or motivations, and "specific" triggering factors, proximate causes, or opportunities.²³ However, unlike Belkin and Schofer and others, we

use these terms to distinguish between underlying causes of presidential instability and the contextual conditions that determine the form that presidential removal will take.

We compare the literatures on military coups and presidential impeachments to disentangle general motivations from specific capabilities in studies emphasizing economic conditions, social mobilization, historical legacies, international factors, political parties, and elite preferences. Despite examining the two outcomes separately, much of the scholarship on coups and impeachments assumes that similar economic, political, and social processes drive them.²⁴

Economic conditions

Scholars have viewed levels of economic development and rates of economic growth as general preconditions to military coups and inter-branch confrontations that destabilize politics.²⁵ For these researchers, poverty is a direct cause of social and political discontent, and coups are a drastic response to an unstable economic situation.²⁶ Londregan and Poole note that poverty was a common denominator for almost all coups in their extensive dataset,²⁷ and Przeworski et al. highlight the importance of reaching a threshold of economic development in order to avoid instability.²⁸ Hiroi and Omori, as well as Singh, show that greater per capita income reduces the risk of coups across regime types.²⁹ Growth is also important: Merks and Kim document that negative economic shocks increase the risk of military rebellions.³⁰

The evidence about economic determinants of impeachment is less consistent but points in a similar direction. In one of the few pieces that examines coups and legal removals jointly, Álvarez and Marsteintredet conclude that the level of development and prolonged recessions have an important impact on both outcomes.³¹ Hochstetler and Edwards find that higher per capita income and economic growth reduce the risk of challenges against presidents.³² In turn, Helmke finds that higher per capita gross domestic product (GDP) lowers the chance of an inter-branch crisis, although faster rates of economic growth do not seem to reduce the risk.³³ In sum, malaise created by poor economic conditions appears to be a common motivation behind coups and impeachments.

Social mobilization

In a classic study, Huntington claimed that social mobilization unconstrained by political institutions is a source of regime instability. Álvarez and Marsteintredet find that general strike activity in the previous year has a positive impact on the chances of democratic breakdown, while Casper and Tyson find evidence that mass protests provide elites with a public signal that helps them coordinate in a coup.³⁴ Still, other cross-national analyses find no relationship between protests and coups.³⁵

There is greater scholarly consensus that popular protest is a central explanation of legal removals. In a situation of economic crisis, social mobilization encourages legislators to turn against the executive – as with Dilma Rousseff's 2016 impeachment in Brazil. Hochstetler and Kim find in their studies that the presence of street protests is crucial to determine the president's fate,³⁶ and Pérez-Liñán argues that multi-class protests encourage impeachment proceedings against the president.³⁷ Mass protests indicate that major social forces are against the government, and motivate opposition elites to overthrow the president.³⁸

Historical legacies

Other accounts of presidential instability emphasize inherited legacies. This is especially true for military coups. For instance, Finer and Putnam hypothesized that a single coup could cause the erosion of a society's political culture and lead to a greater risk of future interventions.³⁹ A number of scholars similarly found that military rebellions are more likely to occur in countries with a previous history of coups.⁴⁰

Past military interventions embolden coup-mongers because military officers become experienced conspirators and because civilian institutions are weakened by recurrent disruptions. In contrast, the evidence for an equivalent "impeachment trap" is considerably weaker. Although Helmke has pointed out that Latin American "countries tend to experience multiple [constitutional] crises or none at all",⁴¹ Hochstetler and Samuels claim that the climate of political instability usually recedes within one year of a presidential ouster.⁴² Marsteintredet argues that a presidential interruption does not create further turmoil if the president is removed for violating the law, yet turmoil may recur when the crisis results from conflicts over policy or economic performance.⁴³

Regional diffusion

A long line of research has invoked international diffusion as an explanation for democratic instability – though not necessarily government instability. Fossum showed a "neighbour effect" among economically and militarily important countries.⁴⁴ Pitcher et al. find support for the diffusion of violence in general, but less so for coups, while Brinks and Coppedge note that countries tend to match levels of democracy among their contiguous neighbours.⁴⁵ Similarly, Gleditsch and Weyland document patterns of regional diffusion,⁴⁶ and Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán argue that regional diffusion is crucial to understand the wave of democratization in Latin America after 1977.⁴⁷ However, Miller et al. claim that elite-based forms of instability do not easily disseminate across borders.⁴⁸

International constraints to the feasibility of military coups are also discussed by the literature on legal removals. Region-wide changes in ideational trends and in the orientation of international organizations led to a transformation in the feasible set of strategies available to radical actors. As more countries democratized and military rule met greater resistance from regional organizations and United States policymakers, radical opponents have abandoned the military option and looked for legal mechanisms to remove undesirable presidents.⁴⁹ Thus, the regional context may strengthen the position of coup perpetrators, or otherwise direct elites towards legal strategies against the president.⁵⁰

Party support

Students of presidentialism claim that legislative support for the president is crucial to prevent political instability. Two different causal mechanisms are discussed in the literature. The first one is executive-legislative conflict. In their classic study, Linz and Valenzuela argue that presidentialism is propitious for political instability due to the fixed terms of office and competing sources of legitimacy for each branch of government.⁵¹ Mainwaring adds that presidentialism with multi-party systems (which generate minority governments) promotes executive-legislative conflict and encourages instability.⁵²

Against this view, recent studies suggest that the size of the president's party in congress has no discernible effect on the chances of a coup. Cheibub does not find a

significant statistical relationship between divided government and democratic instability in Latin America,⁵³ while Helmke finds no impact of this variable on the risk of inter-branch crises.⁵⁴ Svobik shows that presidentialism increases the risk of incumbent takeovers (self-coups), but not the risk of military coups against the president.⁵⁵

A second, less controversial mechanism is commonly invoked in the study of impeachments. A president may survive serious media scandals if a “legislative shield” protects him or her against the formal impeachment process.⁵⁶ Studies by Negretto and Kim show that presidential administrations without majority support in congress are particularly susceptible to collapse.⁵⁷ The quorum to avoid a successful impeachment depends on the size and discipline of the president’s coalition. Thus, strong partisan support for the president reduces the viability of an impeachment – and forces radical opponents to consider the military option.

Political elites

Studies of military intervention frequently focus on interactions between the government, civilian opponents, and the armed forces, while studies of impeachment emphasize negotiations between the president and the legislature.⁵⁸ These narratives are difficult to encapsulate in a few variables. Following Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán, we focus on elites’ normative regime preferences and their radicalism.⁵⁹

A strong normative preference for democracy forecloses the possibility of a military coup and leaves legal removal as the only acceptable strategy for the opposition. In contrast, when opponents are not committed to democracy as the “only game in town”, they face less compunction about seeking non-democratic forms of presidential removal. Normative preferences of government forces also matter: a president dismissive of democratic rules may be unwilling to recognize the legitimacy of an impeachment procedure, driving opponents to consider the option of a coup.⁶⁰

Radical actors have intense and extreme preferences; they are reluctant to bargain and remain intransigent in defence of their policy goals. When democratically elected presidents pursue policies that radical actors deem unacceptable, the latter question the legitimacy of the government in order to derail its agenda. Under those circumstances, radical leaders form a “disloyal” opposition and simply pursue the most effective ways to terminate the administration.⁶¹ Radicalism is therefore discussed in the literature as a potential cause of military coups, but also as an explanation for the role of social movements forcing the resignation of presidents in Bolivia and Ecuador.⁶²

Table 1 summarizes our discussion of the literature and our empirical expectations. Four variables reflect general motivations to pursue the overthrow of the president, and anticipate a greater undifferentiated risk of presidential instability: economic development, growth, mass protest, and radicalism. In contrast, four other variables reflect the relative capabilities of different groups, and thus predict – given the previous conditions – a greater probability of military coups or legal removals: a history of previous coups, regional coups, the size of the congressional party, and normative preferences for democracy.

Analysis

To test the expectations presented in **Table 1**, we use discrete-time event history models. Our sample covers all democratic regimes in 19 Latin American countries between 1945

Table 1. Causal mechanisms for coups and legal removals.

Explanation	Mechanisms (examples)		Expectation
	<i>Coup</i>	<i>Legal ousting</i>	
Level of development	<i>Motives: Modernization</i> (O’Kane 1981; Londregan & Poole 1990; Przeworski et al. 2000)	<i>Motives: Modernization</i> (Alvarez & Marsteintredet 2010; Helmke 2010)	Presidential instability
Economic growth	<i>Motives: Performance</i> (Merx 1973; Kim 2016)	<i>Motives: Performance</i> (Hochstetler & Edwards 2009)	Presidential instability
Protest	<i>Motives: Mobilization</i> (Fossum 1967; Huntington 1968; Alvarez & Marsteintredet 2010)	<i>Motives: Mobilization</i> (Hochstetler 2006; Pérez-Liñán 2007; Alvarez & Marsteintredet 2010; Kim 2014)	Presidential instability
Radicalism	<i>Motives: Disloyalty</i> (Linz 1978; Mainwaring & Pérez-Liñán 2013)	<i>Motives: Disloyalty</i> (Benavente Urbina 2005)	Presidential instability
Previous coups	<i>Capabilities: Coup trap</i> (O’Kane 1981; Londregan & Poole 1990; Dix 1994; Belkin & Schofer 2003)		Coup
Regional coups	<i>Capabilities: Diffusion</i> (Fossum 1967; Pitcher, Hamblin et al. 1978; Brinks & Coppedge 2006)		Coup
Congressional party	<i>Motives: Deadlock</i> (Linz 1990; Mainwaring 1993; Linz & Valenzuela 1994; Mainwaring & Shugart 1997)	<i>Capabilities: Shield</i> (Hochstetler 2006; Negretto 2006; Pérez-Liñán 2007; Kim 2014)	Coup
Normative preferences	<i>Capabilities: Regime support</i> (Mainwaring & Pérez-Liñán 2013; García Holgado 2016)		Legal ousting

and 2010.⁶³ We exclude authoritarian cases because theories about constitutional removals were not conceived for authoritarian incumbents.

The dependent variable, *presidential exit*, comes from an original dataset covering every recognized political leader in Latin America since 1945.⁶⁴ It measures yearly outcomes for each president: survival, exit via military coup, or exit via legal removal. By legal removal we refer to situations in which a constitutional procedure – such as an impeachment, declaration of incapacity, or executive resignation – interrupts the administration without the use of military force.⁶⁵ All other forms of exit, including the normal completion of the president’s term, death in office, or resignation for health reasons, are treated as instances of right-censoring. Our sample includes 17 coups and one constitutional exit (the resignation of Alfonso López in Colombia in 1945) before 1978, and four coups (Bolivia 1980, Ecuador 2000, Venezuela 2002, and Honduras 2009) and 14 removals after 1977.⁶⁶

Independent variables

Motivations to overthrow the president

Our tests include per capita GDP (measured in thousands of 2005 US dollars), and the economic growth rate, measured as percent change in per capita GDP. Figures for 1960–2010 were taken from the World Development Indicators (WDI) database. To impute GDP figures for previous years, we use growth rates from Penn World Tables, Angus Maddison’s Economic Development Index, and the Oxford Latin

American Economic History Database (OXLAD). The measure of social protest was taken from Banks' Cross-National Time-Series Data Archives. We employ the number of anti-government demonstrations per administration-year (coded from *The New York Times*).⁶⁷

Our indicator of political actors' *radicalism* is based on data from Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán.⁶⁸ Actors were coded as "radical" when they expressed uncompromising policy goals; showed willingness to subvert the law to achieve their policy preferences; or undertook violent protests against the government to force (or prevent) policy change. All actors were given a score of 1 (radical), 0.5 ("somewhat" radical), or 0 (moderate). We employ the average radicalism reported for all actors in a country-year.

Relative capabilities

To capture the presence of a coup trap, we include a legacy variable that counts the number of coups over the preceding 20 years in a given country.⁶⁹ Our indicator of regional coup diffusion reflects the number of coups across the region over the preceding five years (excluding the country in question). All countries in our sample have presidential constitutions, but we measure legislative support for the president using the percentage of seats in the lower house held by the president's party.

Normative support for democracy is measured using series from Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán. Based on historical sources, these authors coded political actors as expressing normative preferences for authoritarianism (-1) or for democracy (1). Ambiguous actors were coded as neutral (0). We employ the average score for all actors in each country-year.

Table 2 presents summary statistics of all independent variables. The predictors capture motivations to overthrow the president and the relative viability of the two alternative strategies, military intervention and legal removal. The variables include economic factors, social mobilization, historical legacies, regional diffusion, institutional conditions, and elite preferences, in line with the existing literature.

Estimation

Because we observe the survival of presidents in office at regular intervals, we estimate discrete-time event-history models.⁷⁰ Our units of analysis are administration-years ($n = 729$). To account for duration dependence, we include the administration's time in

Table 2. Summary statistics for independent variables.

Variable	N	Mean	Std. dev.	Min.	Max.
<i>Motivations</i>					
Per capita GDP (thousands)	729	3.05	1.77	0.80	8.61
Per capita GDP growth	729	1.61	3.70	-14.27	16.20
Demonstrations	729	0.75	1.33	0	9
Radicalism	729	0.27	0.27	0.00	1.00
<i>Relative capabilities</i>					
Military coups, past 20 years	729	0.99	1.46	0	8
Military coups (region, 5 years)	729	4.05	4.13	0	14
President's party, % (House)	729	38.9	18.5	0	100
Support for democracy	729	0.48	0.41	-0.56	1.00
Time in office	729	2.84	1.70	0	10

office t , its squared value, t^2 , and its cubed value, t^3 in the equation.⁷¹ All standard errors are clustered by country.

To verify the robustness of our findings, we employ two estimators reflecting different assumptions. The first approach assumes that political leaders opt for one of three independent choices: respecting the executive, pursuing a coup, or promoting a legal ousting. This competing-risks model relies on multinomial probit estimates, treating the survival of the president as the reference category.

The second estimator assumes that political leaders decide sequentially whether to remove the president and, in such a case, what procedure to follow. Because leaders are strategic, information about viable forms of removal also informs the decision to challenge the president in the first place.⁷² For example, congressional leaders may avoid a confrontation with the president if they lack enough votes for an impeachment and anticipate that military action would be the only choice to overthrow the government. The second survival model thus relies on a probit estimator with sample selection.⁷³ The selection equation captures the risk of an interrupted presidency (as opposed to survival in office) and the outcome equation captures the risk of a coup (as opposed to a legal removal).

Results

Table 3 presents the results of our analysis. All estimates are expressed as probit coefficients, with positive values indicating greater risk. The eight variables are included as predictors in the competing-risks model (3.1). These variables also explain presidential interruption in the selection model (3.2), but only proxies for relative capabilities are taken to explain the small number of coups (21 out of 36 interruptions). The results are highly consistent across the two models, yielding confidence in our findings.

General sources of instability

The first set of variables in Model 3.1 displays consistent effects on coups and legal removals, indicating that they map onto general motivations to interrupt the presidential term. Periods of economic growth reduce the risk of coups and impeachments, while social protests expand the risk of instability considerably. Every anti-government demonstration large enough to be reported by *The New York Times* increases the risk for the president by more than 30%. The sign of the estimates for per capita GDP is consistent with existing theories, but no estimate is statistically significant.

Radicalism appears to have large substantive effects on coups and legal removals; nonetheless, the coefficient for coups in 3.1 is not statistically significant. This result suggests that radical opponents destabilize all presidencies, but their actions result in legal removals (for example, forced resignations) more than military intervention. Model 3.2 confirms that economic recession, mass protests, and radical oppositions are significant sources of instability.⁷⁴

In Figure 1 we compare the predicted probability of presidential instability for three independent variables – growth, protests, and radicalism – based on Model 3.2. The top row of graphics reflects the risk of legal removal (coup = 0; interruption = 1), while the bottom row reflects the risk of military intervention (coup = 1; interruption = 1). To create each plot, we fixed the independent variable at multiple values and estimated the risk for all observations in the sample, holding other predictors at their observed levels. Predictions reflect the average risk calculated for the 729 observations at each

Table 3. Models of legal removals and military coups.

	3.1 Multinomial		3.2 Selection	
	Legal	Coup	Interrupt	Coup
<i>Motivations</i>				
Per capita GDP (thousands)	-0.167 (0.107)	-0.191 (0.134)	-0.118 (0.081)	
Per capita GDP growth	-0.076*** (0.022)	-0.076** (0.036)	-0.054*** (0.017)	
Demonstrations	0.288*** (0.081)	0.274** (0.115)	0.212*** (0.049)	
Radicalism	1.394* (0.739)	1.022 (0.642)	0.813** (0.395)	
<i>Relative capabilities</i>				
Military coups, past 20 years	0.063 (0.083)	0.127 (0.099)	0.059 (0.051)	-0.191 (0.281)
Military coups (region)	-0.107** (0.050)	0.087** (0.038)	0.020 (0.023)	0.407* (0.213)
President's party, % (House)	-0.015** (0.007)	-0.000 (0.006)	-0.004 (0.004)	0.052** (0.022)
Support for democracy	0.918 (0.559)	-1.120** (0.532)	-0.133 (0.273)	-4.969*** (0.849)
<i>Baseline hazard</i>				
T	0.053 (0.611)	-1.177 (1.202)	-0.182 (0.403)	
t ²	-0.064 (0.156)	0.421 (0.388)	0.054 (0.100)	
t ³	0.007 (0.011)	-0.037 (0.036)	-0.003 (0.007)	
Intercept	-2.670*** (0.813)	-2.569*** (0.935)	-1.673*** (0.430)	-2.131* (1.190)
N	729		36	729
Rho			0.257 (0.735)	
Log-Likelihood	-124.65		-123.22	

Note: Entries are probit estimates (standard errors clustered by country).

N = 729 (Interruptions = 36; Coups = 21; Countries = 19).

* $p < 0.10$ ** $p < 0.05$ *** $p < 0.01$.

level of the independent variable.⁷⁵ Figure 1 underscores the role of common motivations behind coups and impeachments. Economic recession, demonstrations, and radicalization consistently expand the risk of both outcomes.

Factors separating legal removals and coups

Results in Table 3 show that a regional context marked by military coups has different consequences for each form of presidential instability. An increase in the number of military rebellions in neighbouring countries strengthens the position of domestic coup-mongers. The first column in Figure 2 illustrates this effect by comparing the predicted probability of legal removals and coups in different regional environments. A large number of coups in neighbouring countries expands the risk of military intervention but reduces the probability of legal removal in the observed country.

Regional diffusion therefore provides a crucial explanation for the historical transformation in patterns of presidential instability. Military coups were more frequent in the context of the Cold War, particularly in the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution during the 1960s and the 1970s. The regional dissemination patterns that help explain an increase in the number of democratic transitions and a decline in the number of

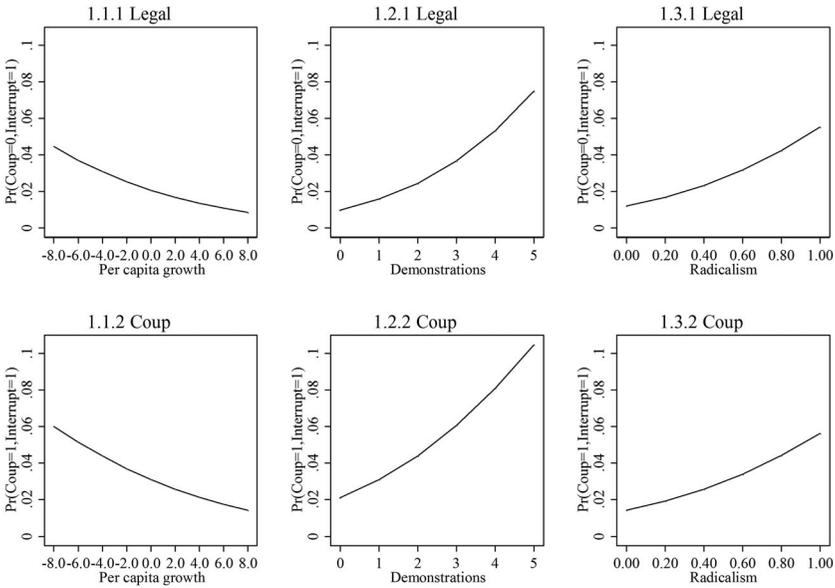


Figure 1. Common explanations for legal removals and coups. Note: Graphs are based on Model 3.2. Estimates reflect the average predicted probabilities for the 729 observations, fixing growth, demonstrations, and radicalism at selected values while holding all other variables at their observed levels.

coups after 1977 also help explain, through a substitution effect, the emergence of legal removals as an alternative mechanism to deal with embattled presidents in the 1990s and the 2000s.⁷⁶

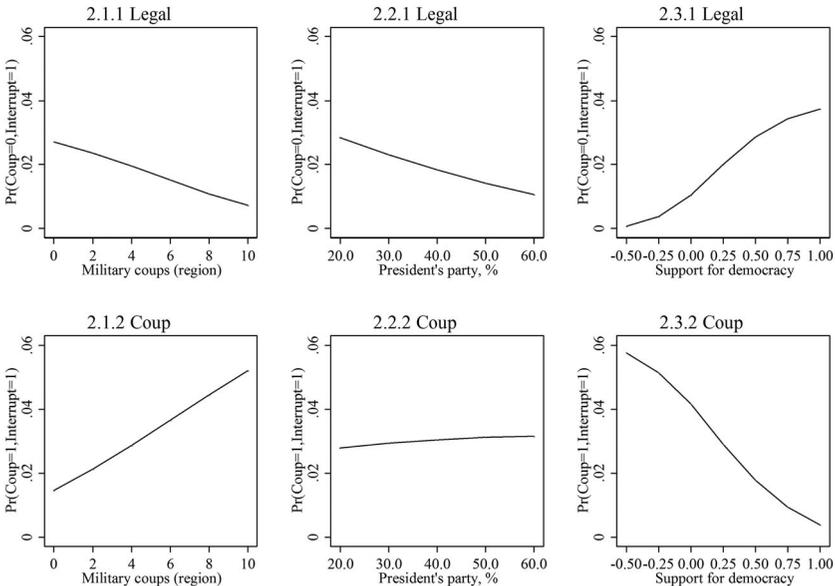


Figure 2. Factors separating legal removals and coups. Note: Predicted probabilities based on Model 3.2.

Institutional conditions may also facilitate or hinder legal removals. Model 3.1 suggests that the size of the president's party in congress reflects the strength of the legislative shield against impeachment.⁷⁷ In turn, Model 3.2 shows that the size of the president's party has no significant effect on the general risk of instability, relieving traditional concerns about the "difficult combination" of presidentialism and multipartism.⁷⁸ However, because partisan support for the president blocks the possibility of legal removal, it expands the *relative* risk of a military coup. The second column of Figure 2 illustrates this pattern: the risk of military overthrow remains independent from the composition of congress, but impeachment is less likely when the legislature is controlled by the executive.

Table 3 offers no evidence in favour of the idea of a coup trap; democratic regimes with a history of military intervention tend to display greater instability, but this effect is not statistically significant. The table shows, however, that normative regime preferences have a strong influence on the resolution of presidential crises. The third column of Figure 2 shows that a military coup is very unlikely when all actors are committed to democracy. In contrast, the risk of legal removal expands as groups operating within the constitution become empowered in the midst of a presidential crisis by the opposition's reluctance to engage in military conspiracies.

Discussion and conclusions

This article has developed a unified theory of constitutional and unconstitutional presidential instability, distinguishing contextual factors that motivate opponents to overthrow the president from specific capabilities that embolden some opponents to pursue a military or a civilian resolution to the crisis. Economic recessions, mass protests, and radicalized political actors map into general conditions that explain *why* elected presidents fail. By contrast, the regional diffusion of military coups, the size of the president's party in congress, and political elites' normative preferences for democracy help explain *how* presidents are removed from office.

The key contribution of this piece is to explain different types of presidential exit within a single framework, modelling convergent and divergent factors that drive presidential transfers of power. We offer evidence of this argument, estimating discrete-time event history models with an original dataset of all Latin American presidential exits from 1945 to 2010. Our findings are consistent when we estimate a competing-risks model as well as a sample-selection model.

Our findings underscore that common causes of presidential instability are not necessarily causes of democratic breakdown, yet crises of government may easily escalate into crises of the democratic regime when legal venues for the removal of the president are blocked.

For example, these findings suggest that the 2009 military coup in Honduras was a likely outcome. President Zelaya progressively moved towards the left of the ruling Liberal Party. As he radicalized, the president's political decisions began to cause friction with the vice-president, his own party, Congress, and the business sector.⁷⁹ Driven in part by internal disputes about succession, party leaders abandoned the president and sided with the more recalcitrant sectors of the opposition. The president insisted on conducting a popular plebiscite to reform the constitution, ignoring the opposition of Congress, the Supreme Court, and military officers. Legislators threatened to remove Zelaya, but a constitutional reform had eliminated the impeachment procedure in

2002. In the end, the opposition backed a military operation, which overthrew Zelaya in June 2009.⁸⁰

In contrast, the impeachment of president Dilma Rousseff in August 2016 illustrates how economic recession and protests encouraged opposition leaders to sacrifice the president in congress. Even though multiple scandals compromised the administrations of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT) prior to 2011, the possibility of an impeachment against President Lula da Silva was always remote. Between 2011 and 2013, during Rousseff's first term in office, economic growth rates fluctuated around 2%, and the percentage of the population approving her administration fluctuated between 48% and 63%. Starting in 2013, however, the Brazilian economy entered a period of deep recession and corruption investigations undermined the credibility of PT leaders. Public support for the administration collapsed abruptly, reaching 36% on average during 2014 and 10% during 2015.⁸¹ In March 2016, the president's coalition in congress broke down, exposing the weakness of a ruling party that controlled less than 20% of the seats in congress. Outside the legislature, pro-government demonstrators confronted anti-government protests. In April the Chamber of Deputies charged the president with manipulating the budget. The Senate ultimately impeached Rousseff and removed her from office in August 2016. Paradoxically, what President Rousseff decried as a "coup" was a characteristic example of opportunistic opponents ousting the president without democratic breakdown.⁸²

In a global context in which presidents and their adversaries – in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Turkey, among other places – have displayed growing levels of radicalism, our findings raise concerns for the future. Radical actors create polarization and political instability. Radical opponents seek to overthrow the government by all means possible. Radical governments, in turn, block legal channels against the executive in order to maximize the probability of survival. This process, mistakenly described by Linz as an "abdication" of the moderates,⁸³ reflects a dynamic of polarization that displaces moderate forces and ultimately opens the way to military intervention.⁸⁴

The results also point to other important implications for the consolidation of democracy. While economic stagnation, radicalization, and social protest contribute to presidential instability, other factors may tip the regime towards a democratic or non-democratic resolution. Proliferation of military coups in the region and a lack of commitment to democracy from domestic elites decrease the probability of a legal impeachment and increase the likelihood of a coup. International policymakers would be wise to consider these findings: although the Organization of American States may struggle to invoke the Democratic Charter when dealing with competitive authoritarian regimes like Venezuela, long-term efforts to build regional organizations that discourage military intervention and steady support for democratic leaders may ultimately save democracy from breakdown when a crisis compromises the legitimacy of an elected administration.

Notes

1. Marsteintredet, "Explaining Variation"; Pérez-Liñán, "A Two-Level Theory."
2. Belkin and Schofer, "Toward a Structural Understanding"; Collier and Hoeffler, *Grand Extortion*; Fitch, "Post-Transition Coups"; Nordlinger, *Soldiers in Politics*; O'Kane, "A Probabilistic Approach."
3. Baumgartner and Kada, *Checking Executive Power*; Llanos and Marsteintredet, *Presidential Breakdowns*; Pérez-Liñán, *Crisis Without Breakdown*.

4. Álvarez and Marsteintredet, “Presidential and Democratic Breakdowns”; Kim and Bahry, “Interrupted Presidencies.”
5. Needler, “Political Development and Military Intervention,” 616.
6. Fossum, “Factors Influencing the Occurrence.”
7. Lowenthal, “Review,” 107.
8. Dix, “Military Coups and Military Rule”; Powell and Thyne, “Global Instances of Coups.”
9. Croissant, “Coups and Post-Coup Politics,” 267.
10. Kada, “Impeachment as a Punishment for Corruption?”; Pérez-Liñán, “Pugna de Poderes y Crisis de Gobernabilidad.”
11. Llanos and Marsteintredet, *Presidential Breakdowns*; Valenzuela, “Latin American Presidencies Interrupted.”
12. Fernando Collor de Mello (Brazil, 1992), Carlos Andrés Pérez (Venezuela, 1993), Abdalá Bucaram (Ecuador, 1997), Raúl Cubas Grau (Paraguay, 1999), Lucio Gutiérrez (Ecuador, 2005), Fernando Lugo (Paraguay, 2012), Otto Pérez Molina (Guatemala, 2015), and Dilma Rousseff (Brazil, 2016).
13. Hernán Siles Zuazo (Bolivia, 1985), Raúl Alfonsín (Argentina, 1989), Alberto Fujimori (Peru, 2000), Fernando de la Rúa (Argentina, 2001), and Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada (Bolivia, 2003). Joaquín Balaguer (Dominican Republic, 1996) resigned after two years of his (seventh) term in office, following an agreement to overcome an electoral dispute.
14. Rosalía Arteaga (Ecuador, 1997), Alberto Rodríguez Saá (Argentina, 2002), Eduardo Duhalde (Argentina, 2003), Carlos Mesa (Bolivia, 2005), and Eduardo Rodríguez Veltzé (Bolivia, 2006).
15. Jorge Serrano (Guatemala, 1993), Jamil Mahuad (Ecuador, 2000), and Manuel Zelaya (Honduras, 2009).
16. Llanos and Marsteintredet, *Presidential Breakdowns*.
17. Valenzuela, “Latin American Presidencies Interrupted.”
18. Kim and Bahry, “Interrupted Presidencies.”
19. Pérez-Liñán, *Crisis Without Breakdown*.
20. Rittinger and Cleary, “Confronting Coup Risk”; Taylor-Robinson and Ura, “Public Opinion and Conflict.”
21. For a careful review of theories emphasizing motivations and capabilities, see Zimmermann, *Political Violence*; Brooker, *Non-Democratic Regimes*; and Belkin and Schofer, “Toward a Structural Understanding.”
22. This approach does not deny that particular groups will have distinct motivations to overthrow the president. For example, military officers may pursue a coup to protect distinctive institutional interests (see Needler, “Military Motivations”). But general motivations, such as economic recession or mass protests, facilitate the formation of broad social coalitions against the president.
23. See, for instance, Belkin and Schofer, “Toward a Structural Understanding”; Luttwak, *Coup d’Etat*, 28–56; Finer, *The Man on Horseback*.
24. For a rare empirical study that compares the causes of both outcomes, see Álvarez and Marsteintredet, “Presidential and Democratic Breakdowns.” For a study that treats those outcomes jointly but without distinction, see Kim and Bahry, “Interrupted Presidencies.”
25. Needler, “Political Development and Military Intervention”; Finer, *The Man on Horseback*; Needler, *Latin American Politics*; Luttwak, *Coup d’Etat*.
26. Nordlinger, *Soldiers in Politics*; O’Kane, “A Probabilistic Approach.”
27. Londregan and Poole, “Poverty, the Coup Trap, and the Seizure.”
28. Przeworski et al., *Democracy and Development*.
29. Hiroi and Omori, “Causes and Triggers of Coups d’Etat”; Singh, *Seizing Power*.
30. Merckx, “Recessions and Rebellions”; Kim, “Revisiting Economic Shocks and Coups.”
31. Álvarez and Marsteintredet, “Presidential and Democratic Breakdowns.”
32. Hochstetler and Edwards, “Failed Presidencies.” But see, Kim, “Impeachment and Presidential Politics.”
33. Helmke, “The Origins of Institutional Crisis.”
34. Huntington, *Political Order*; Álvarez and Marsteintredet, “Presidential and Democratic Breakdowns”; Casper and Tyson, “Popular Protest and Elite Coordination.”
35. Singh, *Seizing Power*.
36. Hochstetler, “Rethinking Presidentialism”; Kim, “Impeachment and Presidential Politics.”

37. Pérez-Liñán, "A Two-Level Theory."
38. Protests may also reflect the political ability of social movement leaders. But a focus on leaders' capabilities does not yield any general prediction on whether groups supporting a coup or a legal removal would gain an advantage. Elites may use protests as an excuse to demand the legal resignation of the president or to overthrow the government by force.
39. Finer, *The Man on Horseback*; Putnam, "Toward Explaining Military Intervention."
40. O'Kane, "A Probabilistic Approach"; Londregan and Poole, "Poverty, the Coup Trap, and the Seizure"; Lehoucq and Pérez-Liñán, "Breaking Out of the Coup Trap"; Singh, *Seizing Power*.
41. Helmke, "The Origins of Institutional Crisis," 742.
42. Hochstetler and Samuels, "Crisis and Rapid Reequilibration."
43. Marsteintredet, "Explaining Variation."
44. Fossum, "Factors Influencing the Occurrence."
45. Pitcher, Hamblin, and Miller, "The Diffusion of Collective Violence"; Brinks and Coppedge, "Diffusion is no Illusion."
46. Gleditsch, *All International Politics is Local*; Weyland, *Making Waves*.
47. Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán, *Democracies and Dictatorships*.
48. Miller, Joseph, and Ohl, "Are Coups Really Contagious?"
49. Legler and Tiekou "What Difference?"; McCoy "International Response"; Pérez-Liñán, *Crisis Without Breakdown*; Wobig, "Defending Democracy."
50. Bruneau and Trinkunas, "Democratization as a Global Phenomenon."
51. Linz, "The Perils of Presidentialism"; Linz and Valenzuela, *The Failure of Presidential Democracy*; Valenzuela, "Latin American Presidencies Interrupted." Huntington (*Political Order*) argued that weak political institutions increase the probability of a coup.
52. Mainwaring, "Presidentialism, Multipartism, and Democracy"; Mainwaring and Shugart, "Conclusion."
53. Cheibub, "Minority Governments, Deadlock Situations."
54. Helmke, "The Origins of Institutional Crisis."
55. Svolik, "Which Democracies Will Last?"
56. Hinojosa and Pérez-Liñán, "Presidential Impeachment and the Politics of Survival"; Hochstetler, "Rethinking Presidentialism"; Kim, "Impeachment and Presidential Politics"; Negretto, "Minority Presidents"; Pérez-Liñán, "A Two-Level Theory"; Pérez-Liñán, *Crisis Without Breakdown*.
57. Negretto, "Minority Presidents"; Kim, "Impeachment and Presidential Politics."
58. For example, Linz, *Crisis, Breakdown, and Reequilibration*. But see also Croissant, "Coups and Post-Coup Politics"; Hochstetler, "Rethinking Presidentialism."
59. Elite preferences are potentially endogenous to regime instability. Lack of space prevents us from addressing this econometric issue in the article, but to dispel concerns see Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán, *Democracies and Dictatorships*, Chapter 4.
60. García Holgado, "Vencedores y vencidos."
61. Linz, *Crisis, Breakdown, and Reequilibration*.
62. Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán, *Democracies and Dictatorships*; Benavente Urbina, "Populismo Radical."
63. Presidents were observed at 1 January of each year, and selected only if the political regime was coded by Mainwaring, Brinks, and Pérez-Liñán (*Classifying Political Regimes*) as a democracy or semi-democracy. The countries covered by the study are Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela.
64. Existing datasets, such as Archigos, did not provide sufficient information to test our hypotheses. Exits coded as "regular" by Archigos describe presidents who completed their terms as well as legal removals, including impeachments and forced resignations. See Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza, "Introducing Archigos."
65. We do not pass judgment on whether the procedure was properly implemented from a legal standpoint. See Marsteintredet, "Explaining Variation of Executive Instability," on this issue.
66. Venezuela 2002 was coded as a coup event because another administration took office, even though President Chávez returned to power within two days.
67. This indicator is not free from pitfalls. Brockett documents undercounting of political protest and violence in databases drawing events from *The New York Times* and *Keesing's Record of*

- World Events*, while Herkenrath and Knoll find large differences between national and international coverage of protests. Unfortunately, no alternative sources cover such a long span (1945–2010) for all Latin America. Yet, the large mass protests that attract international attention also signal the presence of broad anti-government coalitions. Brockett, “Measuring Political Violence”; Herkenrath and Knoll, “Protest Events in International Press Coverage.”
68. Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán, *Democracies and Dictatorships*. The authors relied on historical sources to identify 1460 political actors under 290 administrations in 20 countries between 1944 and 2010. Political actors are individuals (the president, prominent leaders) and organizations (military factions, parties, social movements, trade unions) that played an important role in the competition for power.
 69. A historical legacy in the form of a coup trap is conceptually distinct from the more direct “regime origin legitimacy effect,” the idea that leaders entering power through extra-constitutional means (for example, a coup) have a higher probability of exiting office the same way. We do not consider this possibility since we exclude authoritarian governments from our empirical database.
 70. Box-Steffensmeier and Jones, *Event History Modelling*, 70.
 71. Carter and Signorino, “Back to the Future.” See also Beck, Katz, and Tucker, “Taking Time Seriously,” and Box-Steffensmeier and Jones, *Event History Modelling*, 75.
 72. Moreover, unobserved variables may simultaneously affect the decision to overthrow the government and the modality employed, potentially biasing multinomial estimates because the three choices are not mutually independent.
 73. Van de Ven and Van Praag, “The Demand for Deductibles in Private Health Insurance.”
 74. Radicalism does not separate coups from impeachments. In a model including radicalism in the outcome equation for Model 3.2, the second-stage estimate for this variable is insignificant. More information is available in the replication file for this article.
 75. Hanmer and Kalkan, “Behind the Curve.”
 76. Brinks and Coppedge, “Diffusion is no Illusion”; Fossum, “Factors Influencing the Occurrence”; Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán, *Democracies and Dictatorships*; Pitcher, Hamblin, and Miller, “The Diffusion of Collective Violence.”
 77. Pérez-Liñán, “A Two-Level Theory.”
 78. Mainwaring, “Presidentialism, Multipartyism, and Democracy.”
 79. Llanos and Marsteintredet, “Ruptura y continuidad,” 180.
 80. Taylor-Robinson and Ura, “Public Opinion and Conflict.”
 81. Pesquisa CNI-IBOPE, *Avaliação do Governo, Resultados Gerais*. Março 2016.
 82. More intriguing was the impeachment of Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo in June 2012, because preconditions for instability, with the possible exception of radicalism, appeared to be absent. See Cerna Villagra and Solís Delgado, “La crisis institucional paraguaya”; Pérez-Liñán, “A Two-Level Theory”; Marsteintredet, Llanos, and Nolte, “Paraguay and the Politics of Impeachment.”
 83. Linz, *Crisis, Breakdown, and Reequilibration*.
 84. Bermeo, *Ordinary People*; Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán, *Democracies and Dictatorships*.

Acknowledgements

We are indebted to Gustavo Emmerich, Guillermo Mira, Fernando Pedrosa, Laura Tedesco, Kathy Hochstetler, and two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the International Political Science Association (IPSA) Conference in Madrid in 2012, at the International Congress of Americanists (ICA) in Vienna in 2012, at the University of Salamanca in May 2013, and at the American Political Science Association (APSA) in Washington, DC, in 2014.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This project was supported by the Center for Latin American Studies and the University Center for International Studies (UCIS), and by the Kellogg Institute for International Studies at the University of Notre Dame.

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