

Insights Series #157

Who Finds Executive Coups Justifiable?

Deniz Orbay
Vanderbilt University

December 14, 2022

Key Findings:

- There is significant variation across countries in levels of tolerance for executive coups—that is, in willingness to justify the executive governing without congress in hard times
- Women and older people tend to be less likely to justify an executive coup (also called a self-coup or *autogolpe*) compared to men and younger people, respectively
- Those with a higher level of education are less likely to justify a self-coup compared to those with a lower level of education
- Individuals who approve of the executive are more likely to find it justifiable for that office to govern without congress in hard times
- Individuals who support strong, rule-bending leaders are more likely to find a hypothetical executive coup justifiable



Autogolpes, also dubbed self-coups, autocoups, or executive coups, are events in which the executive unlawfully increases the power granted to their office by dissolving the country's legislature. What is concerning about this type of coup is that the executive who carries out the coup is usually elected democratically. It is a worrying notion that an inherently democratic process can beget such an authoritarian turn.¹

The past century saw its fair share of coups and self-coups. In the Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) region alone, there were 87 cases of successful coups in the 20th century.² Globally, between 1946 and 2020, there have been an estimated 148 self-coup attempts,³ with at least 5 successful executive coups around the end of the last century.⁴

The LAC region has especially suffered from *autogolpes* in modern history. In 1973, Uruguayan President Bordaberry dissolved parliament, initiating a 12-year-long dictatorship.⁵ In 1992, Peru's President Fujimori dissolved the congress and judiciary of the country, granting himself legislative and judiciary powers.⁶ In 1993, Guatemala's President Serrano attempted a self-coup by suspending the constitution, albeit to no avail. Most recently, in 2017, under President Maduro's leadership, Venezuela's Supreme Tribunal of Justice temporarily stripped the National Assembly of its legislative powers.⁷

While the number of outright coups and executive coups has declined in recent years,⁸ it is still important to investigate how people in the LAC region feel about the potential occurrence of executive coups. Scholars have argued that public opinion plays a role in presidential attempts to increase executive power,^{9,10} so it is crucial that we understand what influences an individual's level of support for an executive coup.

This *Insights* report presents descriptive data on this topic and then analyzes a set of potential predictors of whether individuals deem executive coups to be justifiable in times of emergency. The 2021 round of the LAPOP AmericasBarometer survey measured if an individual finds a hypothetical executive coup justifiable by asking the following question:

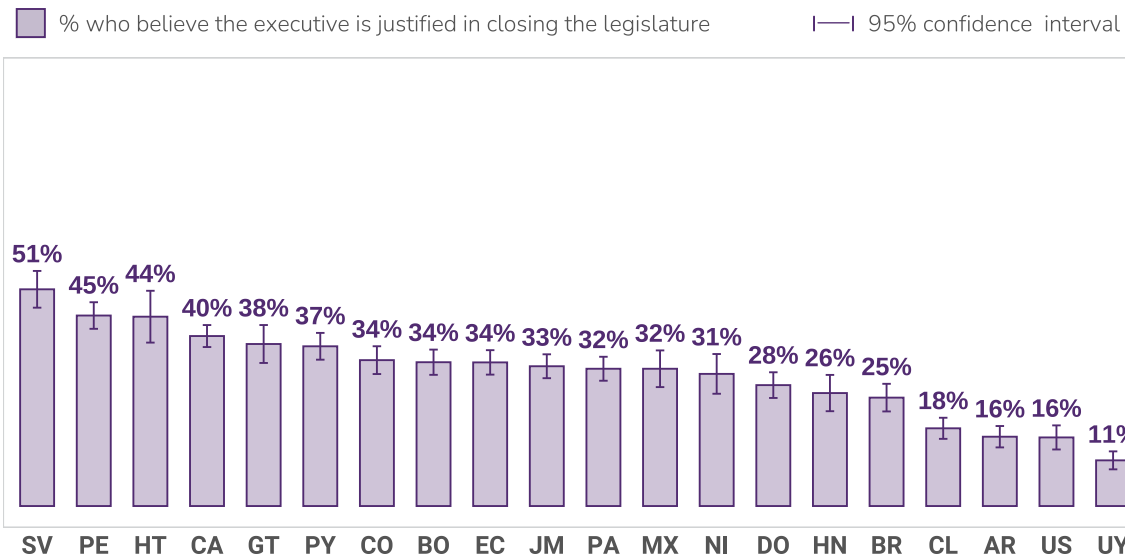
JC15A: Do you believe that when the country is facing very difficult times it is justifiable for the president of the country to close the Congress/Parliament and govern without Congress/Parliament?¹¹

Tolerance for Executive Coups Varies Significantly across the Americas

Figure 1 shows the percentage of people in the surveyed countries who deem executive coups to be justifiable in times of emergency. The country with the highest overall percentage is El Salvador (50.8%); this is the only country in which over 50% express this type of tolerance of executive coups. In contrast, the lowest percentage is found in Uruguay, where only one in ten (10.7%) hold this attitude. The United States has the second lowest percentage (16.1%), effectively tied with Argentina (16.2%) and close to the level found in Chile (18.2%). The aftermath of former president Donald Trump’s failed self-coup¹² in early 2021 raises the question of how U.S. public opinion has been shifting on this topic. Interestingly, and worthy of further study outside the scope of this report, Canada has the fourth highest percentage of individuals who believe executive coups to be justifiable (39.8%).

Figure 1.

Executive Is Justified in Closing Legislature



Source: AmericasBarometer, 2021



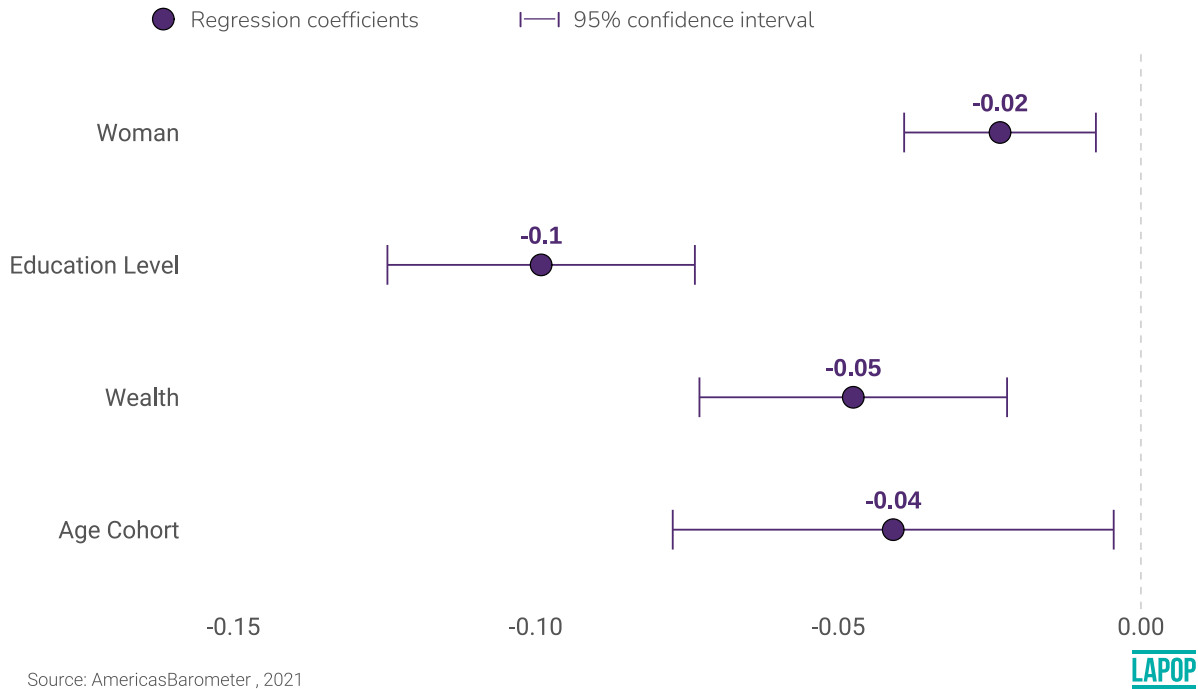
The results presented in Figure 1 fail to provide evidence of any obvious relationship between the countries' public opinion and their experience with coups. Uruguay, Argentina, and Chile all suffered coups and resulting authoritarian regimes in the second half of the 20th century; these countries are less supportive of hypothetical executive coups. However, El Salvador (50.8%) and Peru (44.6%) have also experienced coups in the past, and yet they have the first and second highest percentages in the region. Future research might undertake a more nuanced analysis—considering the timing, type, and outcome of past coups—to determine whether there are any imprints of the past on contemporary public opinion on this topic.

Older, Richer, and More Educated Individuals Are Less Likely to Justify a Coup

In this section, I apply logistic regression analysis to test the correlation between individuals' basic socioeconomic and demographic traits and the likelihood that they believe a hypothetical executive coup could be justified. As independent variables, I chose age, wealth, level of education, and gender.¹³ Figure 2 depicts the predicted change in the likelihood of expressing the view that executive coups are justifiable in times of crisis, given a change from the minimum to the maximum value of the independent variables.¹⁴ While the U.S. and Canada are included in the analysis for Figure 1, the regressions that follow just focus on the LAC region.

All independent variables are statistically significant and negative predictors. On average, older people in the LAC region are four percentage points less likely to find an executive coup justifiable in times of crisis. An explanation for this result could be the fact that older people have personally witnessed and/or been more affected by the results of such coups in the region than younger generations. Another reason might be that older people psychologically find it harder to adapt to new situations, making them less likely to support a radical shift such as an executive coup.¹⁵

People in the highest wealth group, compared to those in the lowest, are five percentage points less likely to justify such a coup. One reason for this, worthy of additional study, may be that the wealthier class has more incentive to maintain the status quo rather than accept radical change.

Figure 2.**Socioeconomic and Demographic Predictors of Tolerance for Executive Closure of Congress**

Among the four predictors, an individual's level of education has the most significant impact on their tendency to justify an executive coup. Compared to those with lower levels of education, the higher educated are ten percentage points less likely to justify such a coup. As individuals with higher education tend to have a lower tolerance for executive aggrandizement, this may lead them to oppose hypothetical self-coups.¹⁶

Gender, while less significant than the other predictors, has an estimated impact of two percentage points: women are less likely to justify a potential executive coup in times of crisis than men.

Support for Popular, Strong Leaders Is Linked to the Belief that Executive Coups Are Justifiable

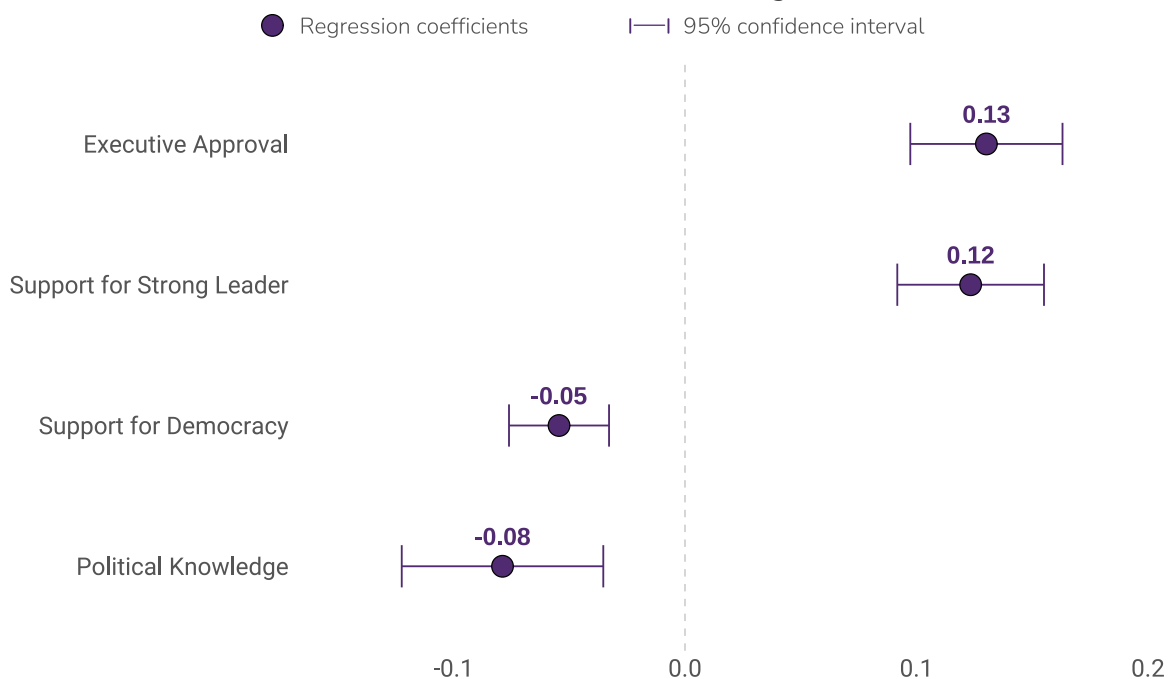
Scholars argue that maneuvers to increase executive power, whether via directly weakening checks and balances or altering the constitution, are usually attempted by popular leaders.^{17,18} Based on this notion, I test whether presidential approval predicts willingness to justify a hypothetical coup.

Scholars have shown that coup justification decreases over time as the public’s support for democracy increases.¹⁹ Thus, I also test whether support for democracy predicts willingness to justify an executive coup. In addition, I assess the extent to which one’s preference for strong leaders and level of political knowledge predict tendencies to justify coups.

I conducted another logistic regression in which I add the following variables as predictors of whether an individual finds an executive coup justifiable: approval of the executive, support for strong leaders, support for democracy, and political knowledge.²⁰ Figure 3 depicts the results from a logistic regression analysis of these variables while controlling for the same variables included in the analysis in Figure 2.

Figure 3.

Predictors of Tolerance for Executive Closure of Congress



Source: AmericasBarometer, 2021



The likelihood of tolerating an executive official's attempts to close the legislature rises as public support for the president increases.²¹ Executive aggrandizement, the hollowing out of democratic institutions through initially democratic maneuvers, is usually conducted by popular, democratically elected leaders.²² Thus, it makes sense to find that presidential approval is linked to a tolerance of an executive coup. The result in the figure shows that individuals who approve of the incumbent official are 13 percentage points more likely to justify an executive coup in times of crisis.

The tendency to support strong, potentially extralegal leaders is common in Latin America.²³ Figure 3 shows that there is a connection between one's support for a leader who bends the rules and one's support for a hypothetical self-coup, which is a breaking of the rules. Those who support strong, potentially extralegal leaders are 12 percentage points more likely to find executive coups justifiable in times of crisis.

There is also a statistically significant relationship between support for democracy and a tendency to justify a self-coup: those who display the highest support for democracy are 5 percentage points less likely to find executive coups justifiable, compared to those with the least support for democracy. As coups in general undermine democratic principles, it is reasonable that support for democracy would mean less support for *autogolpes*.

The final predictor of an individual's tendency to justify a potential self-coup that I consider is their level of political knowledge. I find that those with the highest level of political knowledge are 8 percentage points less likely to justify executive coups compared to those with the lowest level of political knowledge.

Conclusion

This *Insights* report shows attitudes toward executive power—presidential approval and support for strong leaders who can bend the rules—are among the most significant predictors of the tendency to justify executive coups under conditions of crisis. I also find that individuals with a higher level of political knowledge and greater support for democracy are less likely to find executive coups justifiable.

Support for democracy has been positively related to an individual's level of education, which may help explain the negative correlation between education and the tendency to justify executive coups. Older individuals are less likely to justify an executive coup in times of crisis. This result is potentially due to their different past experiences with undemocratic regime types and/or their inability to adapt to change, compared to younger people. Individuals in the highest wealth group, compared to those in the lowest, are also less likely to justify a self-coup, which might be explained by a desire to maintain a status quo that benefits them.

Given the historical precedents of self-coups in the region, there is reason to be wary of the countries that have a comparatively high percentage of individuals who would justify an executive coup, if the country were in times of crisis. A key takeaway from this report is that support for strong leaders and executive approval, respectively, are associated with greater tendencies to justify executive coups. This connection implies that, if strong, popular leaders were to attempt an increase in executive power, people who previously had supported the incumbent ruler may be prone to back such maneuvers. It is worth noting that what constitutes a crisis can be shaped by government rhetoric; an example is Fujimori's self-coup in which he framed the *autogolpe* as steps taken against terrorism and economic struggles.²⁴ This suggests it is important to examine the rhetoric of popular executives to identify ways in which they make the notion of a crisis salient. In brief, the findings in this report underscore the importance of taking the pulse of public opinion regarding views of the executive and tolerance for self-coups, while also keeping an eye on behavior by the executive that may foment additional support for such extralegal actions that diminish the stability and quality of democracy.

Notes

1. Bermeo (2016).
2. Moreno Velador (2019).
3. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-election-coup/2021/01/05/26afcf0-4f6c-11eb-bda4-615aaefd0555_story.html.
4. Bermeo (2016).
5. Pellegrino and Pollero (2014).
6. Cameron (1998).
7. <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/03/30/americas/venezuela-dissolves-national-assembly/>.
8. Bermeo (2016).
9. Taylor-Robinson and Ura (2013).
10. Cameron (1998).
11. A total of 26,372 individuals were asked the question; of these, 2,065 responded "don't know" or did not give a response, for a total item non-response rate of 7.8%. All figures in this report use the following AmericasBarometer dataset version: 2021 v.1.2_w.
12. Pion-Berlin, Bruneau and Goetze (2022).
13. The independent variables are recoded from 0 to 1. The dependent variable is coded so that 0 is "No, not justified" and 1 is "Yes, justified". Age (**EDAD**) is a six-point cohort measure; going from 0 toward 1 in age is from the youngest group to the oldest group. Wealth (**WEALTH**) is measured based on the ownership of certain household items, such as a car, TV, refrigerator, etc. Moving from 0 to 1 in wealth is from the least wealthy to the wealthiest. Level of education (**EDR**) considers the highest level of education an individual has received. The lowest category is no education or primary education (coded as 0), and the highest category is post-secondary education (coded as 1). Gender (**GENDER**) is dichotomous and labeled as "Woman" in the analysis. The measure is based on self-identification. Men are represented by a 0 and women are represented by 1. To avoid listwise deletion of those who identify as "other" in the survey, those individuals are grouped in the "Woman" category. Country fixed effects are included in the analysis as controls but excluded from the figures. The U.S. and Canada are not included in the analyses for Figures 2 and 3.
14. In Figure 2 (and later, Figure 3) the dots represent the change in predicted probability associated with each variable, and the bars represent the 95% confidence interval around that probability. They represent maximal effects, such that the dots represent the change in probability of responding "justified" when moving from the lowest to the highest value on the independent variables. The right side of the dotted line represents a positive relationship, while the left side represents a negative one. If the bar of the independent variable does not intersect with the dotted line, that variable is statistically significant, with a p-value of less than .05. Country fixed effects are included in the analysis as controls but excluded from the figures.
15. Matamales et al (2016).

16. Seligson (2007).
17. Bermeo (2016).
18. Newman (2011).
19. Cassell, Booth, and Seligson (2018).
20. Executive approval is measured with a question (**M1**) that asks “Speaking in general of the current administration, how would you rate the job performance of President (name of current president)?” This is recoded from 0 to 1, such that movement from 0 to 1 means a higher approval of the executive.

Support for a strong, extralegal leader is measured with a question (**CSES6N**) that asks “Having a strong leader in the government, even if the leader bends the rules to get things done. Would you say that it is very good, good, neither good nor bad, bad, or very bad as a form of government for our country?” This was recoded to be from 0 to 1, such that movement from 0 to 1 means more support for strong leaders.

Support for democracy is measured with a question (**ING4**) that asks “Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?” This was recoded to be from 0 to 1, such that movement from 0 to 1 means more support for democracy.

Political knowledge is assessed with a question to the interviewer (**CONOCIM**) that asks “Using the scale shown below, please rate your perception about the level of political knowledge of the interviewee.” This was recoded to be from 0 to 1, such that movement from 0 to 1 means a higher perception of the respondent’s political knowledge.

21. See discussion in Taylor-Robinson and Ura (2013), where the authors build a theoretical model in which they suggest a president would not attempt an increase in executive power if “The People” oppose said president. This conclusion is relevant to my findings in Figure 3.
22. Bermeo (2016).
23. Newman (2011).
24. Cameron (1998).

References

Bermeo, Nancy. 2016. "On Democratic Backsliding." *Journal of Democracy* 27 (1): 5-19.

Cameron, Maxwell A. 1998. "Latin American Autogolpes: Dangerous Undertows in the Third Wave of Democratisation." *Third World Quarterly* 19 (2): 219-239.

Cassell, Kaitlen J., John A. Booth, and Mitchell A. Seligson. 2018. "Support for Coups in the Americas: Mass Norms and Democratization." *Latin American Politics and Society* 60 (4): 1-25.

Matamales, Miriam, Zala Skrbis, Robert J. Hatch, Bernard W. Balleine, Jürgen Götz, and Jesus Bertran-Gonzalez. 2016. "Aging-related Dysfunction of Striatal Cholinergic Interneurons Produces Conflict in Action Selection." *Neuron* 90 (2): 362-373.

Newman, Katja S. 2011. "Constitutional Coups: Advancing Executive Power in Latin American Democracies." Paper prepared for presentation at the Center for the Study of Democracy, 7th Annual Southern California Graduate Student Conference (May 7), University of California, Irvine. Paper retrieved at <https://www.democracy.uci.edu/files/docs/conferences/grad/2011/Newman%20CSD%20011%20Grad%20Conf%20CONSTITUTIONAL%20COUPS.pdf>.


Pellegrino, Adela, and Raquel Pollero. 2014. "Une approche démographique des années difficiles (Uruguay 1973-1985)." *Annales de démographie historique* 128 (2): 65-83.

Pion-Berlin, David, Thomas Bruneau, and Richard B. Goetze. 2022. "The Trump Self-Coup Attempt: Comparisons and Civil–Military Relations." *Government and Opposition*: 1-18.

Seligson, Mitchell A. 2007. "The Rise of Populism and the Left in Latin America." *Journal of Democracy* 18 (3): 81-95.

Taylor-Robinson, Michelle M., and Joseph Daniel Ura. 2013. "Public opinion and conflict in the separation of powers: Understanding the Honduran coup of 2009." *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 25 (1): 105-127.

Velador, Octavio Humberto Moreno. 2019. "Golpismo y neogolpismo en América Latina. Violencia y conflicto político en el siglo veintiuno." *Iberoamérica Social: Revista-red de estudios sociales ESPECIAL*: 98-122.



Deniz Orbay (deniz.orbay@vanderbilt.edu) wrote this report as a sophomore at Vanderbilt University. He is a student in the class of 2025 and is double majoring in Computer Science and Mathematics with a minor in Cinema and Media Arts. He wants to pursue a career in software engineering.

This report was edited by Elizabeth Zechmeister, Laura Sellers, and Meg Frost. This report was translated by Camilo Plata and J. Daniel Montalvo. This report was audited by Meg Frost. Formatting, production, copy editing, graphics, and report distribution were handled by Mariana Rodríguez and Laura Sellers. Our data and reports are available for free download on the project website. Please follow us on Twitter to stay in touch.

As a charter member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) Transparency Initiative, LAPOP Lab is committed to routine disclosure of our data collection and reporting processes. More information about the AmericasBarometer sample designs can be found at vanderbilt.edu/lapop/core-surveys.

This *Insights* report is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Vanderbilt University. The contents of this *Insights* report are the sole responsibility of its author and LAPOP and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, the United States Government or any other supporting organization. LAPOP's AmericasBarometer surveys are supported predominantly by USAID and Vanderbilt University.

vanderbilt.edu/lapop 

@LAPOP_Lab 

lapop@vanderbilt.edu 

+1-615-322-4033 

230 Appleton Place, PMB 505, Suite 304, Nashville, TN 37203, USA 