Democratic Breakdown and Incumbent Takeover Autocracies

Killian Clarke* Anne Meng† Jack Paine‡

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Abstract

Incumbent takeover occurs when a democratically elected leader dismantles free and fair electoral competition. Existing research treats these cases as a residual byproduct of democratic backsliding. We instead examine incumbent-takeover autocracies as objects of study in their own right, characterizing and explaining how they form and how long they survive. Our analysis draws on an original dataset of 265 democratic spells and successor autocracies, measured globally between 1946 and 2025. We establish three main findings. First, the number of incumbent takeovers has increased in recent decades, making them the dominant form of both democratic breakdown and autocracy formation. Second, this increase reflects the increased number of post–Cold War democracies and the decline of coups, as opposed to a higher rate of democratic failure. Third, the autocracies created through incumbent takeover are unusually fragile and frequently collapse through uprisings or coups. Many subsequently re-democratize, making most incumbent-takeover autocracies short-lived.

*Assistant Professor, Georgetown University, Killian.Clarke@georgetown.edu
†Associate Professor, University of Virginia, ameng@virginia.edu
‡Associate Professor, Emory University, jackpaine@emory.edu