Should We Be Alarmed That One-in-Four U.S. Citizens Believes a Military Take-Over Can Be Justifiable?

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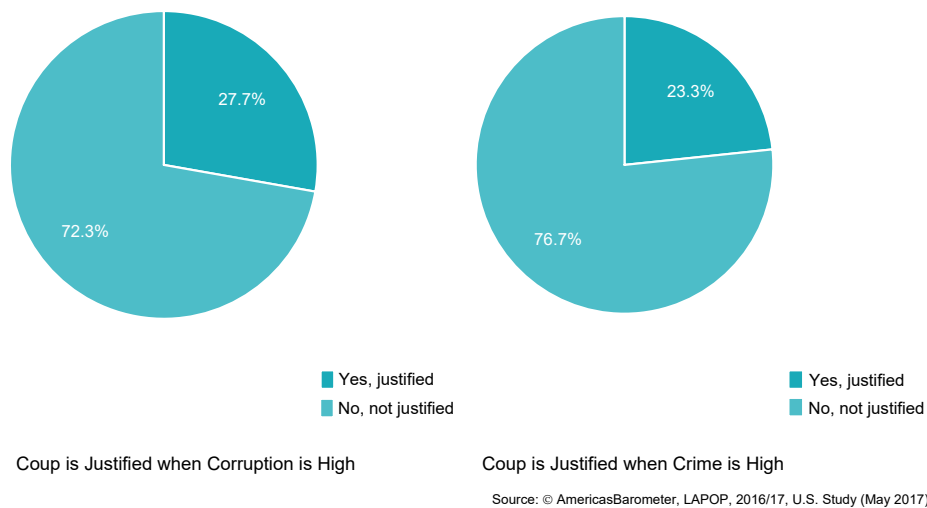
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Approximately one in four adults in the United States reports that it would be reasonable for the military to overthrow our elected government via a *coup d'etat* under certain circumstances marked by social disorder or political dysfunction. In a nationally representative survey conducted in May 2017 as part of LAPOP's most recent AmericasBarometer, 23.3% of U.S. participants responded that it is justifiable for the military to take power when there is a lot of crime; when asked about a situation of high corruption, that proportion increases to 27.7% (see Figure 1). In light of the long tradition of civilian supremacy in the U.S., these seem to be surprising results. Should we be alarmed?

To unpack the significance of the finding that, these days, a quarter of the U.S. public justifies coups, we need to consider at least three things. First, do survey respondents understand the question? Second, is the proportion of U.S. citizens that justifies coups in bad times greater in

2017 than it has been in prior years? And, third, is this proportion higher or lower than that found in other countries?

In this *Methodological Note*, I provide answers to each of these questions through analysis of original experimental data and the AmericasBarometer dataset.

Coup is Justified when Corruption is High   Coup is Justified when Crime is High

Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2016/17, U.S. Study (May 2017)

Figure 1: Justification of Coups Under Different Circumstances, United States 2017

Do Individuals Understand the Question?

The AmericasBarometer question on the justifiability of military coups begins with the following statement:

"Some people say that under some circumstances it would be justified for the military of this country to take power by a *coup d'état* (military coup). In your opinion would a military coup be justified under the following circumstances?"

The question continues on to indicate a particular circumstance: "when there is a lot of crime" or "when there is a lot of corruption".[1]

To assess comprehension, we must consider three elements. Do individuals understand the question to be referring to the U.S. as the target of the coup (as opposed to another country)? Do individuals understand what a coup is? Finally, what do individuals understand by "a lot"?

To address the first two comprehension questions, in 2013 LAPOP's experiments team drew a convenience sample of U.S. citizens aged 18 or older via Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform for "human intelligence tasks."[2] On October 3, 2013, 996 individuals agreed to take a survey that we programmed into the Qualtrics platform.[3] In one section of the survey, we randomly assigned participants to respond to questions about the justifiability of coups while varying the wording in the treatment conditions. The control condition received the standard LAPOP AmericasBarometer wording, noted above. The first treatment condition addressed a concern that people might interpret the question as referring to military intervention in other countries; it added "the U.S. government" to clarify the target of the coup. The second treatment condition addressed a concern that people might not understand what a coup entails; it added "removing the president by force" to clarify. The third treatment condition contained both of these extensions to clarify both the target and nature of the *coup d'etat* referenced in the question. The four experimental conditions are presented in the appendix and also referenced in Table 1.

The results from the experiment reveal that respondents' opinions are *not* conditional on clarifying the target and nature of the coup. With one exception, there are no statistically significant differences across the conditions. The one exception is a statistically significant decrease from 20% justifying a coup under conditions of high crime to 12.3% when the nature of a coup is clarified. However, clarifying the nature of a coup does not generally drive individuals to be less tolerant of coups. That is, we observe no similar difference between the control group and treatment 2 for unemployment and corruption; further, there are no statistically

Table 1: LAPOP Question Wording Experiment on
***Coup d'Etat* Question**

Condition	% Saying it is Justified		
	High Unemployment	A Lot of Crime	A Lot of Corruption
1. Take power by a *coup d'etat* (Control)	4.7	20.0	45.5
2. Take power over the U.S. government in a *coup d'etat* (Treatment 1)	4.3	19.2	51.5
3. Take power by removing the president by force in a *coup d'etat* (Treatment 2)	4.2	12.3*	49.2
4. Take power over the U.S. government by removing the president by force in a *coup d'etat* (Treatment 3)	6.3	17.4	50.0

Table shows experimental conditions (column 1) by key phrases in the question provided to respondent. The remaining text of the question is supplied at the start of this report (see page 2) and in the appendix. Numbers in cells indicate the proportion of respondents from a convenience sample of U.S. MTurk survey respondents who indicated that a coup is justifiable under the given circumstance noted in columns 2-4 and by condition (rows). Respondents were randomly assigned to a condition (row); they were asked about all three circumstances (columns). * indicates that the outcome is statistically distinct from that in the control group (condition 1).

significant differences between the control group and treatment 3, which also clarifies the nature of a *coup d'etat*. In fact, though not statistically significant, we actually find a higher proportion of individuals justifies coups under conditions of high corruption in each of the three treatment conditions versus the control.

While there is no pattern of statistically meaningful differences across the treatment conditions, there is interesting variation across the results in terms of the proportion finding coups justifiable by circumstance (that is, by column in Table 1). On average only about 5% of participants expressed support for the notion that a coup can be justified in bad economic times, about 20% when crime is high, and nearly 50% when corruption is high. Because the experiment drew a convenience sample from which we cannot generalize to the U.S. population, the overall levels of support are less interesting than is the difference across the columns (the circumstances). A similar difference is seen in the national survey data in Figure 1: justification of coups is higher when the focus is on corruption, as opposed to crime.

What do these experiment-based findings suggest? Though we do not have a condition in which we defined "a lot" for respondents, the results suggest that the scenario in individuals' minds when we mention a rule of law problem (crime or corruption) is more extreme than mere "high unemployment." If we recall that the U.S. was founded on the belief that a population has the right to revolt against conditions of tyranny, perhaps we should not be all that surprised to find echoes of this type of tolerance for rebellion under a hypothetical condition in which citizens' physical security is severely at risk or when government has become so corrupt that it is no longer functional.

Does the public currently believe either of these conditions applies? The answer appears to be "no", per responses to two other questions included in the AmericasBarometer. The AmericasBarometer asks individuals to report their perceptions of insecurity in the neighborhood and their perceptions of the pervasiveness of corruption among politicians. With respect to the former, the survey asks:

AOJ11. Speaking of the neighborhood where you live and thinking of the possibility of being assaulted or robbed, do you feel very safe, somewhat safe, somewhat unsafe or very unsafe?

In the 2017 U.S. survey, only 13.1% responded that they felt either somewhat or very unsafe. In the 2016/17 AmericasBarometer, only two countries—Canada and Grenada—register values that are lower (and statistically significant at p<0.05). Further, the value for the U.S. in 2017 is slightly lower than what the AmericasBarometer recorded in 2014 (16%), though the difference across these years is not statistically significant.

The 2016/17 AmericasBarometer also asked about perceptions of corruption among politicians with a question, to which respondents could answer all, more than half, half, less than half, or none:

EXC7NEW. Thinking of politicians in [country], how many do you believe are involved in corruption?

In the 2017 U.S. survey, 45.3% responded that more than half or all politicians are corrupt. While that value may seem high, it actually places the U.S. third to the last in a ranking of all countries in which this question was included in the 2016/17 AmericasBarometer (Lupu 2017). Perceptions of political corruption are lower only in Uruguay and Canada.

Has Justification of Coups in the U.S. Increased?

For many years, scholars, pundits, and others have raised concerns about the quality and stability of U.S. democracy. Recently, on October 6, 2017, a group of experts met at Yale University to consider issues related to the robustness and durability of democracy in the U.S.[4] Scholars cited evidence of political intolerance, inequality, and disenchantment with the U.S. political system within the mass public as reasons for concern. These concerns raise the question: is public disdain for basic rules of democracy increasing?

One of these basic rules is civilian control over the military. If we want to know whether public disdain for fundamental democratic values has changed over time, we can examine changes in the public's tendency to justify coups over time. Figure 2 shows the proportion of the U.S. public that justifies coups under conditions of high crime and high corruption over time. As the graphs show, the proportion of the U.S. mass public that justifies a coup under conditions of either high crime or corruption *decreased* in 2017 compared to prior years.

Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP
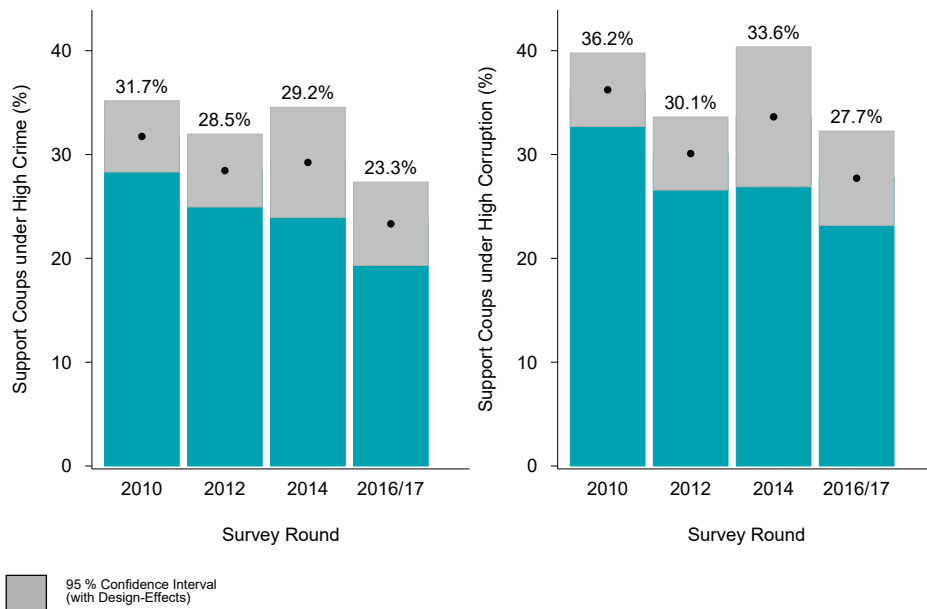
Figure 2: Justification of Coups in the U.S., Over Time

Support for hypothetical *coups d'etat* is only one way to measure commitment to democratic rules; however, this metric does not support the notion that support for foundational democratic rules has waned in recent years.

How Does the U.S. Compare to Other Countries?

A core strength of the AmericasBarometer project is that it permits cross-national comparisons. By considering values for one country in light of those in other countries, we can develop a better sense of whether one in four tolerating coups is a high, low, or average proportion. Figure 3 shows the proportion of the public justifying coups in high crime or high corruption scenarios in each country in which the questions were asked in the 2016/17 AmericasBarometer.[5] The left-hand side of Figure 3 reveals that justification of coups under conditions of high crime is lowest in the United States. The U.S., with 23.3% responding that a coup would be justifiable when there is a lot of crime, sits at the bottom of the ranking alongside Uruguay and Nicaragua (neither of which is statistically distinguishable, at p<0.05, two-tailed, from the U.S.) On the right-hand side of Figure 3, the U.S. falls 4th from the bottom in the ranking, yet with a value that is statistically indistinguishable from the three countries below it: Uruguay, Nicaragua, and Argentina.[6] In short, in comparison to other countries in the region, justification of coups is low among the U.S. adult population.
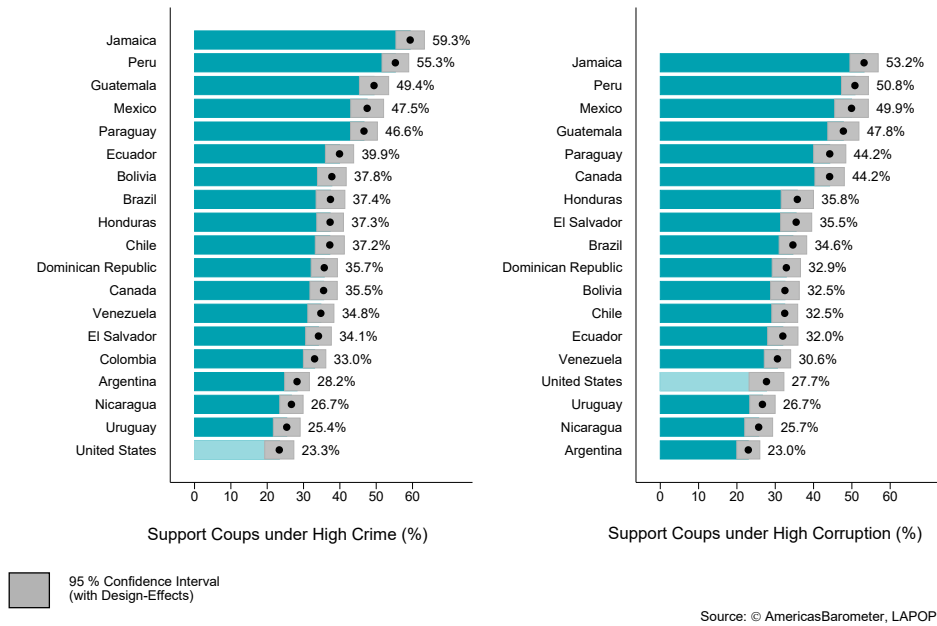
Figure 3: Justification of Coups Under Different Circumstances across Countries

Conclusion

Approximately one in four U.S. adults believes a coup would be justifiable in times of high crime or high corruption. Experimental data show that the prevalence of coup justification is not due to a misunderstanding of the question. It may be disconcerting to see that a sizeable proportion of the U.S. public believes a military option is reasonable (or can be justified) in certain bad times. However, these data alone should not sound alarms over the state of democracy in the U.S., given these three additional findings: 1) justification of *coups d'etat* has decreased in recent years; 2) tolerance for such military interruptions is comparatively low; and, 3) the coup option is considered justifiable only under extreme conditions that do not appear, on average, to be characteristic of how individuals experience and perceive the socio-political situation in the United States.

Notes

1. In past rounds, the AmericasBarometer survey also asked about high unemployment.

2. Amazon's "MTurk" provides a platform for recruiting individuals to participate in online surveys; for this study, eligibility was restricted to those 18 or older and U.S. citizens. The sample is not drawn to be nationally representative. Thanks are owed to Arturo Maldonado and Daniel Zizumbo for their work on this study. In addition, I am grateful to the RIPS experimental lab at Vanderbilt for providing the software platform for the survey experiment.

3. The initial sample contained 17 additional individuals, who were dropped because they completed the survey in an improbably short amount of time and/or failed a compliance check question that we embedded in the study.

4. https://www.vox.com/2017/10/13/16431502/america-democracy-decline-liberalism

5. In Costa Rica, Panama, and Haiti, the question asks about public (government) forces, because there is no standing military. These countries are omitted from the analysis in this report. Note also that the question about corruption and coup justification was not asked in Colombia in the 2016/17 AmericasBarometer.

6. The difference between the U.S. and the country just above, Venezuela, is significant at p<0.05, two-tailed.

References

Lupu, Noam. 2017. "Corruption in the Americas." In *The Political Culture of Democracy in the Americas, 2016/17: A Comparative Study of Democracy and Governance*, edited by Mollie J. Cohen, Noam Lupu, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister. Nashville, TN: LAPOP.

Appendix

Full text of experimental conditions in the survey wording experiment.

- Control. Some people say that under some circumstances it would be justified for the military of this country **to take power by a coup d'état (military coup)**. In your opinion would a military coup be justified under the following circumstances?

- Treatment 1. Some people say that under some circumstances it would be justified for the military of this country **to take power over the U.S. government by a coup d'état (military coup)**. In your opinion, would a military coup be justified under the following circumstances?

- Treatment 2. Some people say that under some circumstances it would be justified for the military of this country **to take power by removing the president by force in a coup d'état (military coup)**. In your opinion, would a military coup be justified under the following circumstances?

- Treatment 3. Some people say that under some circumstances it would be justified for the military of this country **to take power over the U.S. government by removing the president by force in a coup d'état (military coup)**. In your opinion, would a military coup be justified under the following circumstances?