

## Was the U.S. Capitol riot really a coup? Here's why definitions matter.

Calling this a coup obscures important dynamics.

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On Wednesday, an angry partisan mob, some of them armed with lead pipes, chemical sprays and guns, rampaged through the U.S. Capitol, interrupting the formal process of confirmation of the presidential election. It was a deeply troubling effort to derail democracy and steal an election. There are important reasons, however, that should keep analysts from referring to the events as a coup attempt.

### **What defines a coup attempt?**

Although scholars differ in how they define coup attempts, most definitions have a common core of agreed-upon conditions. In my book, "Seizing Power," I define a coup attempt as an explicit action, involving some portion of the state military, police or security forces, undertaken with intent to overthrow the government.

What occurred on Wednesday meets some — but not all — of the conditions to be a coup attempt. Efforts to block the transfer of power to the legitimate victor of an election meet the intent portion of the definition, even if the person who is overthrowing the government is also the incumbent. But the raid on the nation's capital in this instance was committed by a mob, not the country's own armed forces. It is the involvement of state security forces that critically separates a coup attempt from an assassination, an invasion, an insurrection or a civil war.

### **This is an insurrection — not a coup**

What occurred is better described as an insurrection, since it was a violent uprising by citizens against the government. Those bearing arms were civilians, members of the public. This is different from a coup, where a branch of the government uses state forces to attempt to seize power — and this distinction matters.

Here's why: Definitions matter because they direct our attention toward key people or groups and suggest effective responses. The wrong definition obscures our understanding and directs us away from the critical parts of the problem.

There are very different ways to try to undercut democracy. A coup is like being robbed at gunpoint. But Trump's attempt to convince Brad Raffensperger, the Georgia secretary of state, to "find" enough votes to overturn his defeat was more like a swindle, with Trump attempting to talk Raffensperger into handing over his wallet. The attack on the U.S. Capitol was more forceful, yet still different from a coup, more like somebody grabbing your wallet. All three are forms of theft, but the forms are very different, and the responses differ accordingly.

## Calling this a coup obscures important dynamics

Calling something a coup attempt turns our attention toward the state. But what is striking about Trump's behavior is that he is acting as if he is a private citizen rather than president of the United States. He is stirring up protesters, but not using state security forces; he is attempting to wheedle Raffensperger into committing electoral fraud but not — other than vaguely threatening Raffensperger with criminal consequences — using state authority to coerce Raffensperger into doing so.

Trump is able to engage in these anti-democratic actions because of the people who are voluntarily supporting him — not because he is the commander in chief. Those who want to prevent insurrection could respond in a number of ways. One path, taken by Twitter and Facebook, was to suspend Trump's account, thus taking away his megaphone at a time when his remarks might whip up violence.

Another approach is to make it clear to the other politicians who are helping him undermine democracy that there is no return to respectability or business as usual afterward. Would they choose opportunistic behavior in the moment if they knew they would pay the cost of being associated with a rejection of democracy for the rest of their lives? Would they undercut democracy if it shut the door to lucrative employment as a lobbyist? Would they be willing to be shunned socially for decades?

The point is not the specifics of the response, but rather that the diagnosis suggests an analysis and an appropriate reaction. Compared to a coup, an insurrection involves a different set of people, communication is used differently, the role of the police is different, and the remedies are different. The terminology matters because it illuminates the dynamics of this event and how they are different from other kinds of events.

### What might make this a coup?

There is one possibility wherein the current scenario might become a coup, and that is if there are large-scale demonstrations and the military refuses to intervene to stop them, and instead sides with the protesters. This sort of coup undergirds most revolutions. The successful Arab Spring revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt were both popular uprisings and coups.

Based on our best current information, however, there will be no Trump Spring or Trump revolution. Despite the initial breach, government security forces ultimately worked to protect Congress. There also is no sign that military forces will do anything other than support President-elect Joe Biden and the transition. And the fact remains that the police have both the training and manpower to deal with the current scenario, guaranteeing that protests remain peaceful and that those who have committed crimes or are planning to do so will be arrested.

Based on what we know now, this was no coup. And because they lack the protection of state authority, this small rabble of violent partisans can be easily dealt with.

Even if the mob storming the Capitol does not constitute a coup attempt, the attempted insurrection still raises concerns for democracy. Citizens and leaders hoping to protect democracy might focus their efforts on the opportunistic politicians who are choosing to reject democratic norms and undermine democratic legitimacy in a moment of weakness. Without these enablers, even a charismatic leader can do nothing.

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