

# The Role of Militarized Interstate Disputes in Presidential Term Limit Evasions: From Crisis to Consolidation

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## **Abstract**

Presidents enter office knowing the institutional constraints on their tenure. Existing research primarily emphasizes domestic factors driving term limit evasion (TLE), neglecting international influences. Crucially, scholars have not yet explored how ongoing interstate conflicts affect public support for altering presidential term limits. We argue that leaders exploit militarized interstate disputes (MIDs) strategically to convince the public that modifying term limits ensures political continuity and national stability. To test our argument, we introduce a novel dataset, extending the Executive Term Limits in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America data to include additional countries and years. Our findings show that interstate conflicts significantly increase the probability of TLE attempts. Furthermore, the longer these conflicts last, the more likely leaders are to successfully alter term limits. Conflict duration additionally shapes the method of TLE, prolonged conflicts encourage leaders to choose less overtly repressive mechanisms—particularly referendums—instead of judicial methods. This study offers the first comprehensive examination of how interstate conflicts shape both the likelihood and mechanisms of successful and unsuccessful TLE attempts, advancing our understanding of international conflict’s role in executive power consolidation.

Electoral rules are foundational to democracy. Without robust electoral frameworks, elections risk becoming neither free nor fair. Consequently, political scientists typically refrain from classifying states lacking robust electoral frameworks as democracies. Therefore, electoral rules—and any changes to them—are critical to democratic governance.

Electoral rules govern election procedures, candidate eligibility, and how many times an incumbent may seek office. Term limits specifically restrict the duration of an incumbent's tenure or the number of terms they may serve. Term limits are particularly important because they prevent leaders from consolidating excessive power by imposing clear restrictions on their tenure, thereby safeguarding democratic stability.

Modifications to term limits, often called term limit evasions (TLE), occur when leaders attempt to alter established constitutional rules to extend their tenure beyond initial constraints. While these rules are set before incumbents assume office, some leaders nonetheless seek to remove or weaken term limits, potentially prolonging their tenure indefinitely.

Term limit evasions generally benefit incumbents by enabling them to retain power beyond their original mandate, often at the expense of democratic principles. Leaders frequently exploit various political contexts—domestic or international—to legitimize these evasions. Our study specifically investigates how international contexts, operationalized as militarized interstate disputes (MIDs), influence the likelihood of TLE attempts. We focus on militarized disputes due to their intensity and political salience compared to non-militarized conflicts.

Empirical examples illustrate varied outcomes of TLE attempts. In 2001, Guinea's President Conte successfully used a constitutional referendum to remove presidential term limits, extending the presidential term from five to seven years (?). Conversely, in Burkina Faso, President Compaoré's legislative attempt to alter term limits triggered a popular uprising in 2014, ultimately forcing his resignation (?). In Côte d'Ivoire, President Ouattara circumvented term limits successfully through a judicial ruling, enabling his candidacy in the 2020 elections.

Despite similarities in judicial independence, divided party control, and constitutional provisions for referendums, these cases exhibited markedly different outcomes and strategies

for evading term limits. Such variation is puzzling, as similar domestic institutions usually predict similar political outcomes. This divergence prompted us to consider whether international factors might explain the differences observed. Notably, Guinea experienced militarized interstate disputes for seven consecutive years leading up to its referendum, whereas Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire had no comparable conflicts during their respective attempts. This contrast suggests a potential link between interstate conflict and term limit evasion.

Finally, we argue that under prolonged militarized interstate disputes, leaders are particularly likely to rely on referendums as their preferred method of altering term limits. Unlike legislative or judicial approaches, referendums offer a more direct pathway to secure public approval, bolstering the perceived legitimacy of such changes and strengthening the incumbent's political standing.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. The next section reviews existing literature on term limit evasion and international conflict. We then introduce three testable theoretical predictions. First, we hypothesize that militarized interstate disputes increase the likelihood of term limit evasion attempts. Second, we predict that longer interstate conflicts raise the likelihood of successful evasion. Finally, we anticipate that prolonged conflicts particularly increase the likelihood that leaders will use referendums to evade term limits. The third section outlines the dataset and methods used to test our arguments. This study relies primarily on the Correlates of War's Militarized Interstate Disputes dataset and the Executive Term Limits in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America dataset, which we have expanded to more countries and county-year observations. Due to data availability, our analysis is limited to the period between 1989 and 2015. The last section presents our results. The final section concludes and highlights an understudied research agenda that offers valuable insights for scholars of both international relations and democratization.

## Reviewing Term Limit Evasion and International Conflict

Term limits specify the constitutionally mandated period or number of terms during which presidents can seek reelection (Corrales, 2016). Considered essential for democracy, term limits prevent incumbents from personalizing political power or holding office indefinitely for personal advantage (Heyl and Llanos, 2022). By imposing clear restrictions on tenure, term limits inhibit excessive consolidation of power and protect democracy against erosion. Scholars have highlighted various benefits of term limits, including strengthened rule of law, increased horizontal accountability, and reduced risks of democratic backsliding and autocratization (Fruhstorfer and Hudson, 2022).

Although most experts agree that term limits bolster democratic stability, some debate persists. Critics contend that term limits can reduce leaders' accountability, as incumbents nearing the end of their tenure may become less responsive to public demands. Furthermore, term limits may limit democratic representation by restricting voters' ability to retain popular leaders beyond the established term (Heyl and Llanos, 2022). Nevertheless, term limits remain widely recognized as critical democratic safeguards and are implemented in most liberal democracies.

To qualify as a term limit evasion (TLE), three conditions must be satisfied: the leader must hold office through an election, face a constitutional limit on reelection, and alter or eliminate that restriction to permit additional reelection bids (Kouba and Pumr, 2023). This definition excludes leaders ascending to power by non-electoral means. Researchers consistently demonstrate that TLE undermines democratic processes, adversely affecting electoral integrity measures such as public perceptions of election quality, the autonomy of electoral management bodies, and incidence of election-day irregularities, vote-buying, and voter intimidation (Batista et al., 2024).

Term limits are fundamental to democratic governance, yet incumbent leaders frequently attempt to evade them. Although TLE is especially common in countries with authoritarian leanings, such attempts are not exclusive to authoritarian regimes (Versteeg et al., 2020).

Between 1989 and 2015, leaders in 25 out of 66 Sub-Saharan African and Latin American countries (38%) successfully circumvented term limits. For comparison, from 2000 onward, at least 142 of 195 countries (73%) engaged in militarized interstate disputes. During roughly the same period, data from the Comparative Constitutions Project indicate that 44 of 199 countries (22%) adopted entirely new constitutions, while 153 (77%) amended their existing constitutions. [Mietzner and Honna \(2023\)](#) argue that, excluding consolidated democracies, nearly half of the executive leaders worldwide have attempted to alter or remove term limits. Thus, circumventing presidential term limits has become an increasingly prevalent strategy for extending political power, consistent with broader global patterns of autocratization ([Nowack and Leininger, 2022](#)).

Scholars studying TLE addresses both the drivers of evasion attempts and their consequences for democracy and governance. [Nowack and Leininger \(2022\)](#) identify international influences, such as democracy aid, as factors increasing the likelihood of TLE. In contrast, [Corrales \(2016\)](#) emphasizes domestic conditions—including presidential approval, ideology, legislative composition, and judicial independence—arguing that institutional power asymmetries and veto players significantly shape TLE dynamics. Yet despite identifying multiple domestic and international determinants, researchers have overlooked whether interstate conflicts specifically influence presidents' attempts to evade term limits.

To date, TLE researchers have primarily considered interstate war as an outcome rather than as a potential cause of term limit modifications. For instance, [Carter and Nordstrom \(2017\)](#) argue that democratically elected leaders who successfully remove term limits and reduce electoral accountability subsequently exhibit a higher propensity to initiate interstate conflicts compared to leaders constrained by term limits. These leaders, having secured indefinite reelection eligibility, may be more willing to engage in military conflicts due to diminished electoral constraints.

A substantial body of literature examines how international security issues shape domestic political dynamics. Security threats are particularly influential, simultaneously challenging

state sovereignty and individual safety, thus creating conditions conducive to the centralization of executive power and expansion of state capacity (Gibler and Miller, 2014). During periods of external threats, the public is typically more willing to cede power to leaders in exchange for assurances of security—an inclination less apparent in peaceful times. Such threats foster national cohesion, increase public loyalty toward incumbent leaders, and enhance trust in governmental competence during crises (Desch, 1996).

External security threats frequently serve as unifying forces within domestic politics. As fears for national survival intensify, citizens increasingly support incumbent leaders perceived as capable of effectively addressing these threats. Consequently, as Bak, Chávez and Rider (2020) highlight, security threats are not necessarily detrimental to political incumbents; instead, they can strengthen state power and provide leaders with political authority under the justification of national security. Such threats facilitate state centralization, enabling leaders to consolidate authority under the pretext of combating external adversaries, often advancing their own political objectives simultaneously (Gibler and Miller, 2014).

Newly acquired executive authority during times of international crisis can be leveraged for personal political gain. When leaders seek to alter term limits and consolidate power, heightened security threats present a strategic opportunity to persuade the public that such changes are necessary. In these moments, leaders possess both elevated public trust and the institutional means to justify modifications to term limits, as citizens may be more willing to trade democratic constraints for promises of stability, peace, and protection.

International institutions may moderate the rally-around-the-flag effect. Chapman and Reiter (2004) find that endorsement from the UN Security Council legitimizes military action and can boost presidential approval by up to nine percentage points. Nonetheless, international backing is not always required. Scholars have suggested that term limits may incentivize some executives to provoke or exploit crises as a strategy to extend their tenure (Ginsburg, Melton and Elkins, 2010). While interstate conflicts can emerge from diverse causes and may be interpreted differently by domestic and international audiences, our focus is on how such conflicts

shape public support for altering presidential term limits.

## Theoretical Predictions

Presidents assume office knowing their authority is constitutionally time-bound. Term limits are widely regarded by researchers and international human rights experts as a cornerstone of democratic governance, as they impose a finite term and prevent presidents from entrenching themselves in power (Siegler and Cook, 2021). Yet despite these constraints, some presidents seek to modify the rules governing term limits to extend their tenure, sometimes indefinitely. According to Kouba and Pumr (2023), a change qualifies as term limit evasion only if the leader is elected, faces a constitutional restriction on reelection, and tries to remove or modify that restriction to enable reelection.

Democratically elected leaders seeking to extend their tenure often rely on legal institutions to do so. To change term limits within an institutional framework, leaders must persuade the public that such changes are lawful and legitimate. Public support is critical, as leaders aim to avoid being perceived as autocrats who unilaterally rewrite national laws. Instead, they seek to present themselves as democrats operating within the bounds of legal reform. Rather than seizing power through coercion, these leaders strive to maintain authority in a way that appears procedurally legitimate and democratically endorsed.

Leaders who seek to change term limits often aim to prolong their tenure, potentially without any fixed endpoint. However, they usually avoid using force so that they do not appear autocratic. Instead, most leaders rely on legal mechanisms, such as Supreme Court interpretations, legislative amendments, or public referendums, to revise constitutional rules (Batista et al., 2024; Tull and Simons, 2017). These methods demand that leaders persuade citizens the extension is necessary, showing why they should remain in office beyond the initial time frame.

Presidents have an array of tools to influence public opinion. Domestic developments and foreign policy events alike can offer the pretext for extending or abolishing term lim-

its. Scholars focusing on domestic drivers consistently find that these attempts often arise in well-entrenched regimes, where stability facilitates smoother legal pathways (McKie, 2019), ensuring that the process proceeds smoothly through legal channels.<sup>1</sup>

Our focus is on how presidents leverage international politics to persuade the public that changing term limits is necessary. Foreign policy and ties with other states can influence domestic opinion, particularly when they are seen as critical to national interests. Engaging in conflict with a foreign rival—what we define as militarized interstate disputes—can further heighten public concerns, increasing the likelihood of TLE.

Researchers have long argued that international relations substantially shape domestic politics. Garfinkel (1994) contends that when multiple parties vie for power, uncertainty about future governance lowers the likelihood of entering or initiating conflicts, as each faction's distinct interests complicate consensus on military ventures. Because voters cannot be certain who will lead next, they are less willing to support foreign entanglements. By contrast, when a crisis—especially an international one—unfolds, people generally crave stability and may reassess their views of the incumbent. This desire for security often triggers a rally-around-the-flag effect, boosting presidential approval (Chapman and Reiter, 2004; Lee, 1977; Mueller, 1970). Heightened public confidence can then strengthen perceptions of decisive leadership, which presidents may harness for broader political gains.

When confronted by an external threat, leaders can invoke national fears to centralize power, stressing that a strong government is indispensable for protecting the country (Rooney, 2018). In crises, the public often values stability over domestic disagreements, giving leaders a chance to reinforce the “rally-around-the-flag” effect by highlighting how unity and robust leadership are vital for defense. Reduced access to comprehensive information also makes it

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<sup>1</sup>For example, Senegalese President Macky Sall, who is term-limited, canceled the election scheduled for February 2024, citing an ongoing parliamentary investigation and concerns over candidates' eligibility. This indefinite postponement led to significant unrest, with protests erupting in various cities, leading to internet shut-downs and clashes between demonstrators and police. Despite opposition from various candidates and the public, the National Assembly voted to postpone the elections until December. However, domestic and international actors continued to call for an immediate inclusive electoral process. The government relented and Senegalese voters went to the polls on March 24, 2024, to elect a new president in the most wide-open election in the country's history.



harder for citizens to gauge the crisis objectively, increasing their reliance on official narratives. Indeed, some unpopular incumbents even fabricate or escalate conflicts to boost approval (Tir, 2010). Under such conditions, a leader can more convincingly argue that altering term limits is necessary to ensure national security. This leads to our first theoretical prediction:

***H1–International Conflict Hypothesis:*** *A country’s engagement in a militarized interstate dispute increases the possibility its leader attempts term limit evasion.*

Secondly, when a state becomes embroiled in an interstate conflict, leaders can more readily convince citizens that changing leadership might threaten security. They may argue that replacing the incumbent amid external danger risks destabilizing defense. Under these conditions, people are likelier to rally around strong leadership, a sentiment that intensifies as the conflict endures. Over time, the public may come to see stable, centralized leadership as the only effective way to handle persistent threats, making it easier for the president to claim term-limit changes are essential. Consequently, as conflict drags on, the odds of successfully altering or removing term limits increase. This leads to our second theoretical prediction:

***H2–Conflict Duration Hypothesis:*** *Longer durations of militarized interstate disputes make TLE attempts more likely to succeed.*

Finally, altering term limits typically demands persuasion from other influential actors, such as the high court, legislatures, or the public at large. Presidents seeking extended tenure rarely wish to appear as autocrats, so they frame term-limit changes as necessary adjustments grounded in legitimate, legal mechanisms—be it Supreme Court rulings, legislative amendments, or public referendums. An international rival can shape which pathway they choose, as leaders often leverage the rally—around-the-flag effect to sustain a democratic image. Over time, when conflicts persist, citizens may be more inclined to embrace referendums, viewing them as a stabilizing response to external threats. Leaders thus claim broader legitimacy by portraying these referendums as the people’s will rather than a mere power grab. Consequently,

the longer a militarized interstate dispute lasts, the more likely referendums, rather than judicial or legislative channels, become the tool of choice for altering term limits. This leads to our third theoretical prediction:

***H3–Referendum Mechanism Hypothesis:** The longer a militarized interstate dispute lasts, the more likely it is that term limits will be changed through a referendum.*

## Research Design

We predict that militarized interstate conflict increases both the likelihood that presidents will attempt to evade term limits and the probability that such attempts will succeed. To evaluate these propositions, we employ an original dataset of TLE events across 66 countries spanning the years 1989 to 2023. This dataset forms the basis of a country-year panel comprising 2,574 observations. In what follows, we detail our data collection procedures, describe the structure of the panel dataset, and explain how we define and operationalize key variables.

### Creating a Sample of Presidential Term Limit Evasions

We define presidential TLE as an attempt by a sitting president to extend their tenure beyond the constitutionally mandated limit when legally barred from seeking reelection. A leader either makes such an attempt or does not, and attempts either succeed or fail. For empirical analysis, we assembled a sample of TLE events drawn from Latin American and African countries between 1989 and 2023.

To evaluate our theoretical predictions, we build on the Executive Term Limits dataset compiled by [Batista et al. \(2024\)](#), which integrates data from [Cassani \(2021\)](#) Africa Executive Term Limits dataset and [Corrales \(2016\)](#) Latin America coding. The resulting dataset spans 414 presidential terms in 63 countries from 1988 to 2019. Adopting Batista's coding rules, we

expanded coverage to include all African countries and extended the dataset through 2023.<sup>2</sup>

Our empirical analysis investigates TLE attempts across 66 African and Latin American countries from 1989 to 2023, identifying 57 attempts in 37 countries.<sup>3</sup> While previous research has addressed the origins of TLE (Ginsburg, Melton and Elkins, 2010; Versteeg et al., 2020) and its broader societal consequences (Batista et al., 2024), our study focuses on the relationship between interstate conflict and the success of such attempts. We conceptualize the process as two distinct stages: the decision to attempt evasion (coded 0 = no attempt, 1 = attempt) and the outcome of that attempt (0 = failure, 1 = success). Because successful evasion is conditional on an initial attempt, the data-generating processes for these outcomes differ. Recognizing this temporal dependence, we analyze TLE attempts separately before modeling TLE successes.

## Model Selection

Event history analysis (EHA) provides the methodological foundation for our study, allowing us to model both the timing and probability of TLE events across countries and time. EHA is well suited for rare but recurrent political events and facilitates comparative inference about the conditions under which evasions occur. However, TLE presents challenges for standard EHA approaches, such as logistic regression or Cox proportional hazards models, due to its repeated-event structure.<sup>4</sup> For example, among the countries in our sample that experienced successful evasions, nearly 25%<sup>5</sup> had multiple events (see Table 2). Traditional EHA models typically censor units after the first event, which would result in the loss of nearly 500 country-year observations, which reduces statistical power and generalizability. More concerning is that failing to account for repeated events in a country may lead to erroneous inferences because it incorrectly assumes that each event is independent, ignoring the potential influence of

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<sup>2</sup>Although we have expanded the dataset to 2023, we cannot analyze the full extended dataset due to data limitations in militarized interstate disputes.

<sup>3</sup>For perspective, the Comparative Constitutions Project (Elkins, Ginsburg and Melton, 2009) identifies these same countries replaced their constitution with another 91 times between 1989 and 2021.

<sup>4</sup>See Box-Steffensmeier and Jones (2004, 155-182) for a detailed discussion on modeling multiple events.

<sup>5</sup>While this number is nontrivial, it is not as large as repeated interstate conflict. Of the 52 countries that experienced militarized interstate conflict, nearly 70% experienced repeated instances of such disputes.

past occurrences on future ones. This can result in biased variance estimates and incorrect conclusions about the underlying risk factors, as treating only the first occurrence as representative overlooks how term limit evasion dynamics evolve.

A second complication with conventional EHA models is that they treat all events as homogeneous, whereas term limit evasions (TLE) can occur through distinct institutional pathways: high court rulings, legislative changes, or constitutional referenda. We believe a singular interest in the occurrence of “TLE implemented” or “TLE not implemented” oversimplifies the political event and overlooks interesting information. We expect the processes of selecting from among different strategies to be driven by distinct political or institutional factors; more concretely, our referendum mechanism hypothesis predicts that as the duration of the militarized interstate disputes increases, changing the term limits via a referendum will be more likely. Therefore, to make the most use of our data’s complex structure, we combine repeated events and competing risk models, which allows us to capture both evasion recurrences and the strategic selection of evasion pathways based on varying political and institutional conditions.

#### *Attempted Presidential Term-limit Evasions*

We analyze 66 countries over a 35-year period beginning in 1989, recording whether the sitting president attempted to evade constitutional term limits. Table 1 documents 57 TLE attempts across 37 countries, identifying the year and method of each attempt. The earliest recorded attempt occurred in Peru (1993), while the most recent cases are in the Central African Republic and Egypt (2023). The table excludes 39 countries in the sample where no attempts were made. Among the 57 attempts, the most common strategies were legislative (20), referendum (16), and the high court (12). We also identify a small number of uncoordinated or opportunistic actions as “unstrategic.” Term limit evasion attempts peaked in the 2000s (25 cases), followed by the 2010s (18). Although the 2020s are not yet complete, the first four years already include five attempts, putting this decade on pace to exceed the 1990s (9).

Figure 1 displays Nelson-Aalen cumulative hazard functions for TLE attempts and mili-

Country	Year(s) of Attempt	Country	Year(s) of Attempt
Algeria	2008 <sup>§</sup>	Guinea	2001 <sup>*</sup> , 2020 <sup>*</sup>
Argentina	1994 <sup>§</sup> , 1998 <sup>‡</sup> , 2013 <sup>‡</sup>	Honduras	2009 <sup>†</sup> , 2015 <sup>†</sup>
Bolivia	2009 <sup>*</sup> , 2018 <sup>†</sup>	Malawi	2002 <sup>§</sup>
Brazil	1997 <sup>§</sup>	Namibia	1999 <sup>§</sup>
Burkina Faso	1997 <sup>§</sup> , 2005 <sup>†</sup> , 2014 <sup>§</sup>	Nicaragua	2009 <sup>†</sup> , 2014 <sup>§</sup>
Burundi	2015 <sup>†</sup>	Niger	2009 <sup>‡</sup>
Cameroon	2008 <sup>§</sup>	Nigeria	2006 <sup>§</sup>
Central African Republic	2023 <sup>*</sup>	Panama	1998 <sup>*</sup> , 2011 <sup>‡</sup>
Chad	2005 <sup>*</sup>	Paraguay	2007 <sup>‡</sup> , 2011 <sup>‡</sup> , 2017 <sup>§</sup>
Colombia	2005 <sup>§</sup> , 2010 <sup>†</sup>	Peru	1993 <sup>*</sup> , 2000 <sup>*</sup> , 2013 <sup>‡</sup>
Costa Rica	2000 <sup>‡</sup> , 2003 <sup>†</sup>	Republic of the Congo	2015 <sup>*</sup>
Cote d'Ivoire	2016 <sup>§</sup> , 2020 <sup>†</sup>	Rwanda	2015 <sup>*</sup>
Djibouti	2010 <sup>§</sup>	Senegal	1998 <sup>§</sup> , 2012 <sup>†</sup>
Dominican Republic	2002 <sup>§</sup> , 2015 <sup>§</sup>	Sudan	2005 <sup>‡</sup>
Ecuador	2008 <sup>*</sup>	Togo	2002 <sup>§</sup>
Egypt	2022 <sup>*</sup> , 2023 <sup>*</sup>	Uganda	2005 <sup>§</sup>
El Salvador	2021 <sup>†</sup>	Venezuela	1999 <sup>*</sup> , 2007 <sup>*</sup> , 2009 <sup>*</sup>
Gabon	2003 <sup>§</sup>	Zambia	2001 <sup>‡</sup> , 2018 <sup>†</sup>
Guatemala	2010 <sup>‡</sup>		

Table 1: *Fifty-seven presidential TLE attempts in 37 countries between 1989 and 2023.*

Modes: (†) High Court, (§) Legislature, (\*) Referendum, (‡) Unstrategic.

tarized interstate disputes (MIDs), disaggregated by region. The y-axis captures the cumulative hazard, which rises with the occurrence of relevant events. Stepwise increases denote periods of heightened activity, while plateaus indicate relative calm. The figure suggests a positive association between TLE attempts and MIDs, lending preliminary support to the international conflict hypothesis—that involvement in a militarized interstate dispute increases the likelihood that a leader will attempt to evade term limits.

Figure 1's left panel show that Latin America experienced a steeper increase in the cumulative hazard of TLE attempts compared to Africa. By 2010, the cumulative hazard in Latin America reached 1.0, suggesting that, on average, each country in the region had encountered at least one TLE attempt.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, the African hazard function remains below 1.0, indicating a lower average frequency of such attempts. This divergence points to meaningful regional variation in the intensity and frequency of TLE activity, potentially shaped by differences in

<sup>6</sup>A cumulative hazard value of 1.0 does not imply that every country attempted TLE once; rather, it reflects an aggregate risk across the region with some countries having multiple attempts while others have none.

political institutions, regional norms, or external influences. This pattern aligns with prior research emphasizing that constraints on executive power and public resistance to term-limit changes are regionally contingent (Baturu, 2014; Ginsburg, Melton and Elkins, 2010). Notably, however, the right panel shows that MID involvement is comparably distributed across both regions, lending further support to the argument that interstate conflict increases the likelihood of TLE attempts regardless of regional political context.

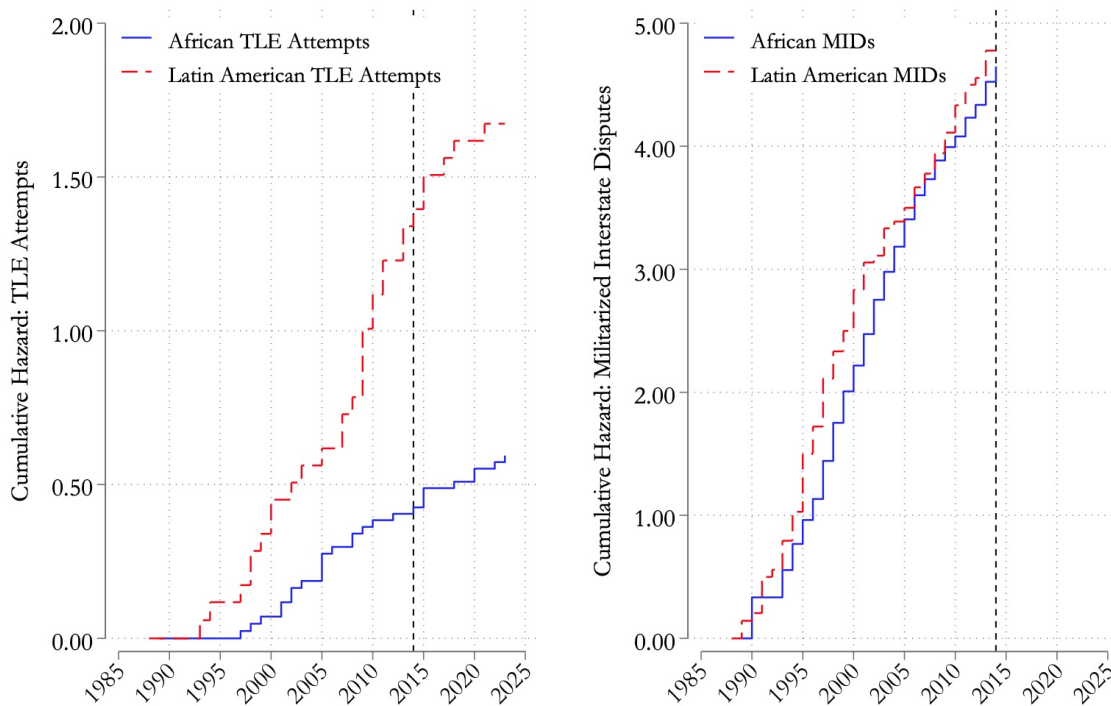


Figure 1: *Nelson-Aalen cumulative hazard functions for presidential term limit evasion.* Vertical reference line identifies end of conflict data.

*Successful Presidential Term-limit Evasions*

Table 2 reports 37 successful TLE attempts across 29 African and Latin American countries between 1989 and 2023. Seven countries listed in Table 1 do not appear in Table 2, indicating failed attempts in Guatemala, Malawi, Niger, Nigeria, Panama, Paraguay, and Senegal. Comparing the tables reveals that 84% (31 of 37) of successful attempts were completed using the

same procedural mechanism with which they began. This pattern suggests that leaders who initiate legislative, judicial, or referendum-based TLEs tend to remain committed to their initial strategy until successful. Examining outcomes over time, we observe a declining success rate: 67% in the 1990s, 64% in the 2000s, and 50% in the 2010s. Notably, however, five of the six TLE attempts observed in the 2020s have succeeded (83%), pointing to a possible reversal of the downward trend. Three key findings emerge from comparing Tables 1 and 2: legislative strategies were the most common for initiating (20 of 57) and completing (18 of 37) TLEs; the success rate declined across the first three decades but shows signs of rebounding; and only seven countries successfully rebuffed all TLE attempts during the observation period.

Country	Year(s) of Evasion	Country	Year(s) of Evasion
Algeria	2008 <sup>§</sup>	Egypt	2022 <sup>*</sup>
Argentina	1994 <sup>§</sup>	El Salvador	2021 <sup>†</sup>
Bolivia	2009 <sup>*</sup> , 2018 <sup>†</sup>	Gabon	2003 <sup>§</sup>
Brazil	1997 <sup>§</sup>	Guinea	2001 <sup>*</sup> , 2020 <sup>*</sup>
Burkina Faso	1997 <sup>§</sup> , 2005 <sup>†</sup> , 2014 <sup>§</sup>	Honduras	2015 <sup>†</sup>
Burundi	2015 <sup>†</sup>	Namibia	1999 <sup>§</sup>
Cameroon	2008 <sup>§</sup>	Nicaragua	2009 <sup>†</sup> , 2014 <sup>†</sup>
Central African Republic	2023 <sup>*</sup>	Peru	1993 <sup>§,*</sup> , 2000 <sup>§</sup>
Chad	2005 <sup>*</sup>	Republic of the Congo	2015 <sup>*</sup>
Colombia	2005 <sup>†</sup>	Rwanda	2015 <sup>§</sup>
Costa Rica	2003 <sup>†</sup>	Togo	2002 <sup>§</sup>
Cote d'Ivoire	2020 <sup>†</sup>	Uganda	2005 <sup>§</sup>
Djibouti	2010 <sup>§</sup>	Venezuela	1999 <sup>§</sup> , 2009 <sup>*</sup>
Dominican Republic	2002 <sup>§</sup> , 2015 <sup>§</sup>	Zambia	2018 <sup>†</sup>
Ecuador	2008 <sup>§</sup>		

Table 2: *Thirty-seven successful presidential TLE events in 29 countries between 1989-2023.*  
Modes: (†) High Court, (§) Legislature, (\*) Referendum.

Appendix Tables A3 and A4 provide key characteristics of our African and Latin American survival-time dataset. While failure events differ, the samples are the same: they include 66 countries and 2,015 country-year observations, with a median of 32 observations each. The average study duration is approximately 30.53 years per country. There are no gaps in the data, meaning that once a country enters the dataset, its records continue without missing periods.

## Operationalizing Response Variables and Interstate Conflict

Building on the description of our panel dataset in the previous section, we now explain how we operationalize our key variables: the response variables and the theoretically relevant independent variables. Appendix Tables A1 and A2 summarize these variables and presents descriptive statistics for the analyzed dataset. We apply distinct operationalizations for term limit evasion and militarized interstate conflict, depending on the outcome and hypothesis tested.

The primary outcomes of interest are presidential term-limit evasion attempts and their success. We capture these using two main binary variables: *TLE Attempted* and *TLE Successful (Pooled)*. Leaders may attempt to alter term limits and, if successful, do so through distinct institutional mechanisms. We disaggregate successful TLEs into three categories based on the procedural pathway: high court rulings (*TLE Successful: High Court*), legislative amendments (*TLE Successful: Legislature*), and referendums (*TLE Successful: Referendum*). Each of our three hypotheses corresponds to one of these outcomes: the first models attempts, the second models successful evasions broadly, and the third focuses specifically on successful referendum-based evasions.

The main independent variable in our analysis is militarized interstate conflict. We capture this using two measures: a binary indicator for the presence of conflict (*Conflict*) and a continuous measure for the number of consecutive years a country has been involved in conflict (*Conflict Duration*). The *Conflict* variable codes whether a country experienced one or more militarized interstate disputes in a given year. The *Conflict Duration* variable tracks the number of consecutive years a country has been engaged in conflict, including disputes with multiple adversaries. Each measure is used to test different hypotheses regarding the effects of international conflict on term limit evasion.

To measure interstate conflict, we rely on version 5.0 of the Correlates of War Project's Militarized Interstate Disputes (MID) dataset (Palmer et al., 2022).<sup>7</sup> We selected this dataset

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<sup>7</sup>They employ the definition of Jones, Bremer and Singer (1996) for defining militarized interstate conflicts, which is: "Militarized interstate disputes are united historical cases of conflict in which the threat, display or use of military force short of war by one member state is explicitly directed towards the government, official



for both its comprehensive temporal coverage and its clear definitional threshold: MIDs include incidents involving the threat, display, or use of military force between states. This definition ensures that only substantively meaningful conflicts—those in which coercive military action is present—are included. Given our interest in the political effects of external threats, we restrict our scope to militarized disputes in order to capture cases where the conflict is both intense and publicly salient.

We selected the MID dataset in part because it reports conflict at the country-event level, which facilitates conversion into a country-year panel. Using these event-level data, we construct two variables for each country-year from 1989 to 2015: (1) whether the country experienced a militarized interstate dispute and (2) the number of consecutive years the country remained engaged in such conflict. This structure allows us to operationalize both the binary and duration-based measures central to our hypotheses. Alternative datasets, such as PRIO, do not provide annualized coverage of all conflict episodes, making them less suitable for capturing year-to-year variation in conflict duration.

We use militarized interstate conflict as the study’s central explanatory variable, theorizing that leaders may leverage external threats to justify term limit changes. Each of our three hypotheses is tested using a distinct operationalization of this variable. The first hypothesis examines the effect of experiencing conflict in a given year on the likelihood of a TLE attempt, using a binary indicator (*Conflict*). The second and third hypotheses assess the effects of prolonged conflict, measured as the number of consecutive years in which a country is engaged in interstate disputes (*Conflict Duration*).

## Control Variables

We include several control variables commonly used in recent TLE studies (e.g., [Batista et al., 2024](#); [Fruhstorfer and Hudson, 2022](#); [Haggard and Tiede, 2025](#); [Kouba and Pumr, 2023](#); [Ne-](#)

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representatives, official forces, property, or territory of another state. Disputes are composed of incidents that range in intensity from threats to use force to actual combat short of war.”

gretto, 2022). Unless otherwise noted, all control variables are lagged by one year to mitigate concerns about reverse causality and simultaneity bias.

We include controls corresponding to each institutional pathway for TLE. To capture judicial constraints, we use the Latent Judicial Independence measure developed by Linzer and Staton (2015), which captures not only formal autonomy but also the *de facto* capacity of courts to implement decisions despite resistance from other political actors. We expect lower levels of judicial independence to present presidents with fewer obstacles to extending or removing term limits through legal challenges. For the legislative pathway, we use V-Dem's (Coppedge et al., 2024) Divided Party Control index (`v2x_divparctrl`), which captures the extent to which the executive and legislature are controlled by different parties. We expect presidents to find legislative evasion more feasible in unified government contexts. Finally, to account for variation in the ease of referendum-based constitutional change, we include a V-Dem categorical variable (`v2ddlexor`) that captures whether direct popular approval is required for constitutional amendments to be legally binding.

Populism's theoretical and conceptual attributes—particularly its anti-institutional and majoritarian tendencies—closely align with behaviors associated with presidential term limit evasion. Populist leaders often frame themselves as the sole legitimate *vox populi* and tend to undermine institutions that constrain executive power, including courts, legislatures, and constitutional limits (Elkins, Ginsburg and Melton, 2009; Ginsburg, Melton and Elkins, 2010). This delegitimization of opposition and concentration of authority increases the likelihood of institutional manipulation. As Urbinati (2019) argues, populism constitutes a “disfigurement” of democracy, one that exploits democratic mechanisms to erode pluralism and accountability. We expect populist leaders to be more likely to pursue term limit evasion, particularly through mechanisms that allow them to claim democratic legitimacy, such as referendums.

Cross-national measures of populism remain limited, and those that do exist—such as the Global Populism Database (Hawkins et al., 2019)—do not adequately cover the countries in our sample. To address this, we draw on Haggard and Tiede (2025) binary coding of populist

executives, which is based on the Tony Blair Institute’s “Populists in Power” dataset (Kyle and Gultchin, 2018). This classification identifies populist leaders from 1990 to 2020 (with extensions through 2021 by the authors) using two ideational criteria: (1) the claim that the “true people” are locked in moral conflict with outsiders, and (2) the belief that nothing should constrain the will of the people. In addition, we include a continuous measure from V-Dem (`v2exl1legitlead`) that captures the degree to which a leader is described as extraordinary or charismatic—e.g., portrayed as the “father of the nation,” heroic, or uniquely gifted.

Our final set of control variables captures contextual variation across political and economic environments that may shape TLE feasibility. Political Polarization (Coppedge et al., 2024, `v2cacamps`) reflects the degree of ideological distance between partisan camps, which may influence both the decision to hold a referendum and its outcome. In highly polarized contexts, support for a referendum may stem more from opposition to political rivals than from principled support for institutional change. We also include Constitutional Executive Power (Elkins, Ginsburg and Melton, 2012), a measure of the formal authority granted to the executive in relation to the legislature. Greater executive power may lower institutional barriers to constitutional revision. To account for economic performance, we include a measure GDP per Capita (Coppedge et al., 2024, `e_gdppc`), under the assumption that sustained economic growth may strengthen incumbents’ claims to remain in office. Finally, we include geographic region dummies for Africa and Latin America to capture unobserved regional heterogeneity.

## Analysis of Survival-time Model for Multiple TLE Attempts

Table 3 presents estimates from a parametric survival-time model evaluating the likelihood of TLE attempts. Across all specifications, the shape parameters of the Weibull distribution ( $p$ ) are statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ), confirming the appropriateness of this functional form. The estimated shape parameters are consistently below one, indicating a declining hazard rate over time—that is, the likelihood of a TLE attempt decreases the longer a country goes

without one. The results offer preliminary support for the International Conflict Hypothesis that predicts countries engaged in militarized interstate disputes exhibit a higher likelihood of TLE attempts. We test this claim using two operationalizations of conflict: a binary indicator for MID presence in the prior year (Models 1 and 2) and a continuous measure of conflict duration in the current year (Models 3 and 4).

Models 1 and 2 suggest a positive relationship between MID involvement and TLE attempts, though the effect is not statistically significant at conventional levels. The presence of a MID is associated with an increased likelihood of TLE attempts, with hazard ratios of 1.75 ( $p = 0.064$ ) and 1.46 ( $p = 0.209$ ) in Models 1 and 2, respectively. While the direction of the relationship supports the International Conflict Hypothesis, the large standard errors (0.53 and 0.44) indicate uncertainty in the estimate and suggests that MID involvement alone may not be sufficient to trigger a TLE attempt. Instead, the duration of the conflict may be a more decisive factor.

In Models 3 and 4, we replace the binary measure of MID engagement with a conflict duration predictor to test our Conflict Duration Hypothesis, which predicts longer-lasting conflicts increase the probability of successful term limit evasion attempts. Conflict duration has a strong, positive, and statistically significant effect (HR = 1.14,  $p = 0.003$  in Model 3; HR = 1.16,  $p = 0.005$  in Model 4). These results indicate that for every additional year of conflict, the hazard of a TLE attempt increases by approximately 14-16%. This suggests that prolonged conflicts provides presidents with the political capital necessary to attempt to evade term-limits. The shape parameter in Model 4 is estimated at 0.440 (95% CI: 0.313–0.619), which means the underlying hazard of TLE attempts is nonconstant and declines as years pass without an attempt. Specifically, after 10 years, countries are roughly 70% as likely to experience a TLE attempt than they are after five years.<sup>8</sup>

Next, we next assess our findings' robustness in two ways. First, we interpret the robustness of our inference by calculating the threshold at which we would invalidate inferences

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<sup>8</sup>Or, to be precise,  $0.678 = \left(\frac{10}{5}\right)^{0.440-1}$

<i>Failure=TLE Attempt</i>	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<i>Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID)<sup>a</sup></i>				
MID Absent	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>		
MID Present	1.75 (0.53)	1.46 (0.44)		
Conflict Duration			1.14** (0.05)	1.16** (0.06)
Judicial Independence <sup>a</sup>		0.30 (0.28)		0.33 (0.31)
Divided Party Control <sup>a</sup>		0.83 (0.12)		0.83 (0.12)
Referendum Enforcement <sup>a</sup>				
Not Required		<i>Ref.</i>		<i>Ref.</i>
Contextual		1.38 (0.36)		1.33 (0.35)
Required		0.37* (0.16)		0.38* (0.17)
<i>Populist Leader<sup>a</sup></i>				
Not Populist		<i>Ref.</i>		<i>Ref.</i>
Populist		1.86* (0.55)		1.68 (0.59)
Extraordinary Leader <sup>a</sup>		1.19 (0.14)		1.21 (0.14)
Political Polarization <sup>a</sup>		0.81 (0.11)		0.82 (0.11)
Executive Power <sup>a</sup>		1.13 (0.10)		1.16 (0.11)
GDP per Capita <sup>a</sup>		✓		✓
Continent		✓		✓
log( <i>p</i> )	0.59*** (0.02)	0.46*** (0.07)	0.60*** (0.02)	0.44*** (0.08)
AIC	-274.34	-280.00	-275.13	-282.31
BIC	-263.84	-216.95	-264.62	-219.26
Obs.	1,414	1,414	1,414	1,414
Countries	66	66	66	66
Failures	44	44	44	44

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

<sup>a</sup> Variable lagged one year.

Table 3: *Parametric regression survival-time model for repeated presidential TLE attempts.*

See Appendix Table A3 for characteristics of TLE attempts survival-time dataset.

by replacing observed cases with unobserved cases that have no relationship between conflict duration and TLE attempts (Frank et al., 2013; Frank and Min, 2007; Pan and Frank, 2003; Rubin, 1974). By quantifying sources of bias from sampling, we find that more than 29.59% of the estimate would have to be due to bias. This means, to invalidate the inference supporting our conflict duration hypothesis, 29.59% (418) observations would have to be replaced with cases for which we know there is zero effect of conflict duration on TLE attempts.

Alternate modeling choices perform our second assessment. The logit models in Appendix Table A5 return similar findings as the parametric regression survival-time models in Table 3. While the logit models provide insights, they do not account for repeated events adequately. Nevertheless, these logit models highlight several important findings: engagement in interstate conflict in the prior year increases the likelihood of TLE attempt, but the estimates are statistically insignificant; conflict curation is positively associated with the TLE attempts, achieving statistical significance in Model 3 (OR = 1.12,  $p < 0.05$ ) and Model 4 (OR = 1.14,  $p < 0.01$ ). Finally, beta coefficients and statistical significance for other predictors are similar.

Returning to Table 3, compared to cases where referendum is not required, the presence of a mandatory referendum significantly decreases the likelihood of a TLE attempt (HR = 0.37,  $p = 0.028$  in Model 2; HR = 0.38,  $p = 0.028$  in Model 4). This suggests that, holding all else equal, strict enforcement of constitutional mechanisms can constrain leaders' ability to evade term limits. However, as interstate conflicts persist, leaders may attempt to frame referendums as necessary for political stability, increasing the likelihood of constitutional changes via public vote.

Populist leaders are significantly more likely to attempt TLE. In Model 2, the hazard ratio for populist leadership is 1.86 ( $p = 0.036$ ), indicating that populist leaders are nearly twice as likely to attempt TLE compared to non-populist leaders. However, in Model 4, where conflict duration is included, the coefficient for populist leadership decreases and becomes insignificant (HR = 1.68,  $p = 0.136$ ), suggesting that the effect of populism may be conditional on other factors, including international conflict dynamics. These results indicate that populist leaders, who often claim to represent the "will of the people" against institutional constraints, may be even more inclined to justify TLE under interstate conflict conditions.

Although not directly related with our research question, we give some attention to the variables controlling for political and institutional contexts that do not predict TLE attempts with accuracy. Higher levels of judicial independence, divided party control, and political polarization may decrease the likelihood of TLE attempts. Although insignificant, the predic-

tors' directionality align with intuition and suggest that political factors can check presidents' evasion ambitions. Meanwhile, TLE attempts may become more likely in contexts where the president is seen as an extraordinary or charismatic leader, or endowed with greater constitutional executive powers.

## Analysis of Competing Risk for Multiple TLE Events

We next test our Referendum Mechanism Hypothesis that predicts as the duration of the militarized interstate disputes increases, changing the term limits via a referendum becomes more likely. To do so, we use a competing risk framework to the parametric regression survival-time models. This extension is necessary because TLE events are complicated sociopolitical processes that can terminate in substantively different ways; specifically, success can occur through the high court, the legislature, or a constitutional referendum. Our data contains only one instance of a hybrid occurrence: in 1993, Peru successfully extended term limits using a combination of legislative and referendum methods. For the purposes of this analysis, we include this singular hybrid event in the pooled model but do not code it as either a legislative- or referendum-driven event.<sup>9</sup> This ensures the hybrid case is represented in the overall survival analysis while maintaining the integrity of the competing risk structure.

Table 4 presents regression results for parametric survival-time models incorporating a competing risk framework to analyze the occurrence of TLE events through distinct pathways: high court decisions, legislative actions, and constitutional referenda.<sup>10</sup> This competing risk framework allows us to differentiate the drivers of TLE events across pathways, underscoring the complex and context-dependent nature of these processes. We estimate these models using maximum likelihood methods, accounting for multiple-failure events across 66 countries and 1,414 observations. The shape parameters of the Weibull distribution ( $p$ ) are statistically

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<sup>9</sup>Our results are unchanged when we code this observation as either legislative- or referendum-driven TLE event.

<sup>10</sup>See Appendix Table A7 for similar table comparing models using MID and Conflict Duration as alternate measures of militarized interstate disputes.

significant ( $p < 0.001$ ) in most models, while the shape parameter in Model 8 is statistically insignificant by conventional standards ( $p = 0.12$ ). Shape parameters are less than one, meaning the likelihood of successful TLE events decreases as time without one increases. The shape parameters in Table 4 are smaller than those in Table 3 but their interpretation is only slightly different: after 10 years, countries are 66% as likely to experience a successful TLE event than after five years.<sup>11</sup>

	Pooled		High Court		Legislature		Referendum	
<i>Failure=Successful TLE Event</i>	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Conflict Duration	1.18*** (0.06)	1.22** (0.08)	0.76 (0.28)	0.77 (0.46)	1.19** (0.07)	1.19* (0.10)	1.26** (0.11)	1.38*** (0.13)
Judicial Independence <sup>a</sup>		0.19 (0.28)		30.58 (130.86)		0.06 (0.15)		<0.00** (<0.00)
Divided Party Control <sup>a</sup>		0.76 (0.16)		0.52 (0.25)		0.87 (0.20)		0.27 (0.26)
<i>Referendum Enforcement<sup>a</sup></i>								
Not Required		<i>Ref.</i>		<i>Ref.</i>		<i>Ref.</i>		<i>Ref.</i>
Contextual		0.73 (0.26)		0.86 (0.91)		0.61 (0.27)		0.44 (0.55)
Required		0.14*** (0.07)		<0.00*** (<0.00)		<0.00*** (<0.00)		6.77 (22.65)
<i>Populist Leader<sup>a</sup></i>								
Not Populist		<i>Ref.</i>		<i>Ref.</i>		<i>Ref.</i>		<i>Ref.</i>
Populist		1.57 (0.49)		<0.00*** (<0.00)		3.31* (1.66)		4.95* (3.87)
Extraordinary Leader <sup>a</sup>		1.28 (0.20)		2.17 (1.17)		1.28 (0.27)		0.99 (0.52)
Political Polarization <sup>a</sup>		0.86 (0.17)		0.77 (0.23)		0.65 (0.19)		2.02* (0.57)
Executive Power <sup>a</sup>		1.35* (0.16)		2.85*** (0.86)		1.32* (0.17)		1.11 (0.33)
GDP per Capita <sup>a</sup>		✓		✓		✓		✓
Continent		✓		✓		✓		✓
<i>p</i>	0.54*** (0.03)	0.34*** (0.10)	0.39*** (0.05)	<0.00* (<0.00)	0.49*** (0.03)	0.36** (0.14)	0.36*** (0.04)	0.40 (0.26)
AIC	-135.77	-139.71	-5.89	-0.65	-66.83	-62.70	-7.77	-10.21
BIC	-125.26	-76.66	4.61	62.40	-56.32	0.35	2.74	52.84
Obs.	1,414	1,414	1,414	1,414	1,414	1,414	1,414	1,414
Countries	66	66	66	66	66	66	66	66
Failures	26 <sup>b</sup>	26 <sup>b</sup>	5	5	16	16	5	5

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

<sup>a</sup> Variable lagged one year.

<sup>b</sup> Peru 1993 utilized both legislative- and referendum-led TLE.

Table 4: *Competing risk parametric regression survival-time model for multiple-failure events of successful presidential TLEs.* See Table A4 for description of the survival-time dataset.

Models 1 and 2 pool all TLE events together and treat them as homogeneous endpoints. Meanwhile, Models 3 thru 8 differentiate between event types and isolate risks associated with high court decisions, legislative actions, and referenda, respectively. In the pooled models,

<sup>11</sup> $0.657 = \left(\frac{10}{5}\right)^{0.395-1}$



conflict duration is a significant predictor and increases the hazard of successful TLE events (HR = 1.181,  $p = 0.001$  in Model 1; HR 1.217,  $p = 0.004$  in Model 2). Conflict duration's hazard ratio is less than one in Models 3 and 4, suggesting conflict duration decreases the likelihood of successful TLE events via the high court mechanism (HR = 0.762,  $p = 0.457$  in Model 3; HR 0.775,  $p = 0.666$  in Model 4). But these hazard ratio are not estimated precisely enough to be statistically significant. In contrast, conflict duration increases the likelihood of TLE events unfolding through the legislature (HR = 1.190,  $p = 0.004$  in Model 5; HR 1.191,  $p = 0.032$  in Model 6).

Models 7 and 8 provide strong empirical support for the Referendum Mechanism Hypothesis, which posits that as the duration of a militarized interstate dispute (MID) increases, leaders are more likely to pursue TLE through referenda rather than other institutional mechanisms. Without controlling for other factors, conflict duration emerges as a strong and statistically significant predictor of referenda-based TLE events (HR = 1.26,  $p = 0.007$ ). This means that each additional year of conflict increases the likelihood that a leader will use a referendum to bypass term limits by approximately 26%; and a standard deviation increase in conflict duration, roughly 1.5 years, increases the likelihood to almost 90%. The model highlights that leaders engaged in prolonged conflicts may frame referenda as necessary to maintain stability, consolidate power, or “democratize” constitutional changes.

Model 8 refines the findings by introducing additional institutional and leadership control variables. Conflict duration's estimated hazard ratio increases and remains highly significant (HR = 1.380,  $p < 0.001$ ), reinforcing that prolonged conflict substantially raises the probability of referendum-driven TLE events. Judicial Independence plays a strong restrictive role in TLE via referenda (HR =  $<0.000$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), suggesting that stronger judicial institutions can impede leaders from using referenda to extend their rule. Meanwhile, the presence of a populist leader increases the likelihood of referendum-based TLE attempts (HR = 4.95,  $p = 0.041$ ), aligning with theories that populist presidents tend to bypass traditional institutions by appealing directly to the electorate.

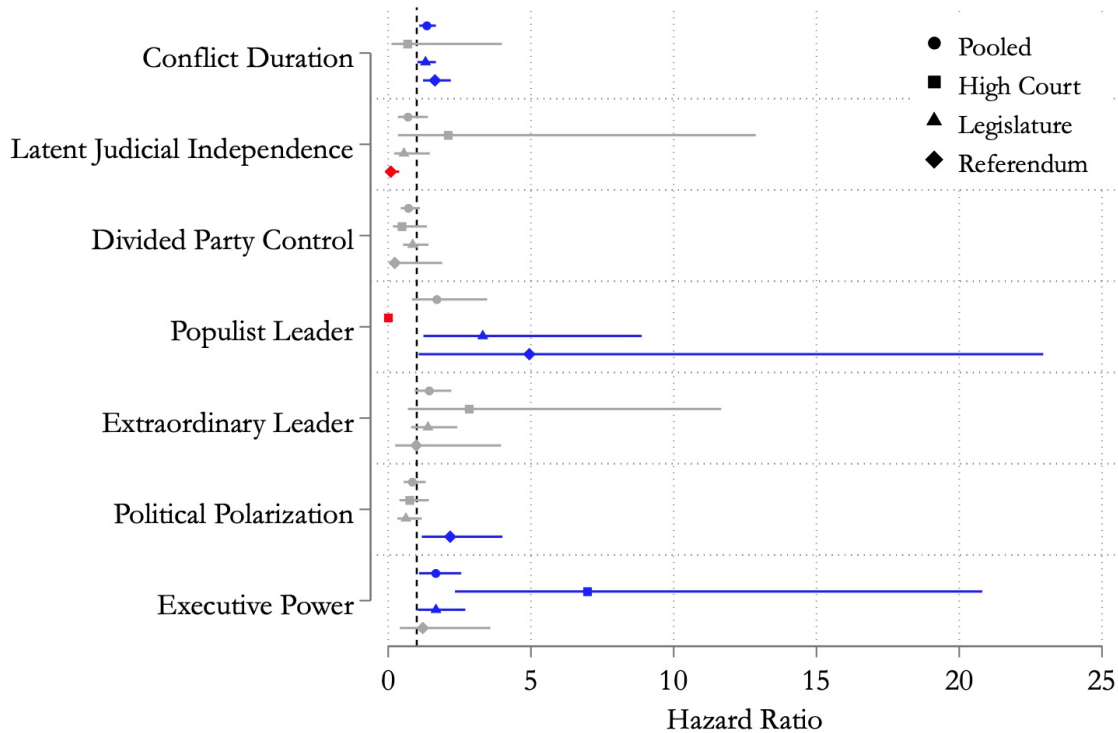


Figure 2: Coefficient plot for competing risks parametric survival-time model for successful presidential TLEs. Coefficients from models in Table 4 and rescaled so that continuous variables reflect one standard deviation increase and binary variables change from zero to one.

Figure 2 provides a visual comparison of the fully-specified models in Table 4 and illustrates how various predictors influence the likelihood of successful TLE through different mechanisms.<sup>12</sup> The effect sizes are standardized such that binary variables reflect a one-unit change, while continuous variables represent a one-standard-deviation increase, allowing for direct comparisons of effect sizes.

While conflict duration exhibits positive associations across multiple competing-risk outcomes, its strongest and most consistent effect emerges in the referendum pathway. This pattern is consistent with political science theories suggesting that leaders facing prolonged external threats may mobilize nationalist sentiment, invoke emergency powers, or capitalize on political instability to justify constitutional change. That referendums are more responsive to

<sup>12</sup>Referendum Enforcement omitted because its significant relationships with TLE mechanisms have near-zero effect sizes.

conflict duration than legislative or judicial mechanisms implies that leaders may strategically favor referenda when they face legal or institutional constraints but retain broad public support. Comparative hazard ratios across mechanisms also indicate that populist leadership and strong executive power exert particularly large effects, reinforcing the view that nationalist rhetoric and institutional centralization increase the likelihood of successful TLE.

The hazard ratios for conflict duration, populist leadership, and political polarization are all greater than one and statistically significant in the referendum models, indicating that increases in any of these sociopolitical conditions heighten the likelihood of referendum-led term-limit evasion (TLE). Conflict duration exhibits a hazard ratio of 1.64 ( $p = 0.001$ ), meaning that a one-standard deviation increase—approximately 1.5 years in this sample—is associated with a 64% increase in the probability of a referendum-based TLE. Notably, 81% of observations in the sample involve no ongoing interstate conflict, which compresses the standard deviation. Among the remaining cases with conflict, most involve durations exceeding one year, and 19 countries—14 in Africa and five in Latin America—experience at least one episode lasting three years or more. Political polarization also exhibits a strong effect: a standard deviation increase (2.17,  $p = 0.013$ ) more than doubles the likelihood of a referendum-led TLE (117%). In contrast, stronger institutional checks appear to constrain such outcomes. A one-standard deviation increase in latent judicial independence (0.09,  $p = 0.001$ ) is associated with a 91% reduction in the likelihood of referendum-driven TLE, underscoring the role of judicial institutions in limiting executive overreach.

These findings offer strong support for the Referendum Mechanism Hypothesis, showing that prolonged interstate conflicts create political conditions that make referendum-based TLE more likely—especially when judicial independence is weak and populist leaders hold office. This reinforces our broader theoretical claim that international conflict can catalyze constitutional manipulation by providing a pretext for leaders to justify institutional change under the banner of national unity and stability. While our primary focus has been on the international context, the models also show that several domestic factors—particularly populist leadership,

political polarization, and expansive executive powers—significantly shape the likelihood of referendum-led TLE. Together, these findings highlight how external crises interact with domestic institutional vulnerabilities to enable leaders to extend their rule through ostensibly democratic means.

## Discussion

We have sought to advance a new explanation for how international conflict shapes not only the occurrence of presidential TLE, but also the mechanism through which such evasion unfolds. Our core argument is that prolonged militarized interstate disputes generate political conditions conducive to legitimacy-seeking strategies. These conditions—heightened public fear, increased national cohesion, and reduced appetite for leadership turnover—are consistent with the rally-around-the-flag effect. Leaders, we argue, strategically activate this effect to justify constitutional changes while maintaining a democratic veneer.

Our theoretical expectation was that, as conflicts endure, leaders would increasingly favor referendums as a mechanism for institutional change. Referendums offer a dual advantage: they enable incumbents to claim democratic legitimacy and allow public anxieties about national security to be channeled into formal institutional revisions. Empirically, our findings confirm that conflict duration is a robust and consistent predictor of referendum-led TLEs.

Unexpectedly, we also observe a significant association between conflict duration and legislative pathways to TLE. Rather than undermining our argument, this finding complements it. The same rally-around-the-flag dynamics that encourage referendum usage may also enable legislative change, particularly in contexts where leaders command strong partisan majorities or legislatures are pliant. Both mechanisms serve as instruments for constitutional manipulation, anchored in perceptions of legitimacy rather than coercion.

This logic further clarifies why the judicial pathway becomes less prominent in the context of extended conflict. Unlike referenda or legislative action, judicial rulings lack popular

engagement. Leaders aiming to avoid the appearance of autocracy prefer mechanisms that signal legal regularity and public consent. Prolonged conflict, therefore, activates a political opportunity in which referenda and legislative amendments become strategically interchangeable, contingent on institutional context.

While our primary focus has been the international context, the findings also underscore the powerful role of domestic enablers. Populist leadership, political polarization, and expansive executive authority each significantly increase the likelihood of referendum-led TLE. These conditions interact with external crises to expand leaders' room for maneuver, enabling constitutional change under the guise of democratic responsiveness. Together, these results show that TLE emerges from the convergence of international conflict and domestic institutional vulnerability, with leaders exploiting both to legitimize efforts to remain in power.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have shown that international conflict not only increases the likelihood of presidential term-limit evasion (TLE), but also shapes the institutional pathway through which it occurs. Specifically, we find that prolonged militarized interstate disputes (MIDs) are strongly associated with referendum-led efforts to alter term limits—especially in countries with weak judicial independence, polarized political environments, and populist leaders. These findings support the claim that leaders exploit wartime conditions to manufacture legitimacy and pursue constitutional change through mechanisms that appear democratic.

This study advances our understanding of how international pressures interact with domestic political structures to produce autocratizing outcomes. While prior researchers have emphasized TLE's domestic origins, we provide systematic evidence that external threats can activate a political opportunity structure in which democratic institutions are reconfigured from within. By focusing on the mechanism of evasion—rather than just its occurrence—we illuminate how presidents tailor their strategies to both institutional constraints and strategic oppor-

tunities.

Our approach is not without limitations. We rely on observational data, and although our modeling strategy mitigates concerns about reverse causality, we cannot definitively establish causal direction. In addition, while our analysis identifies patterns in the timing and form of TLE, future research could further unpack the microfoundations of public opinion and elite coordination during wartime. Nevertheless, our findings carry implications beyond the empirical domain. They suggest that rising international tensions may not only threaten external stability but also enable internal erosion of democratic norms. Referendums, long viewed as tools of direct democracy, may also serve as instruments of executive entrenchment, especially during periods of conflict.

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## Appendix

We use the same sample of 1,414 observations for all analyses and show the summary statistics for that sample in the paper (Table A1). For reference, Table A2 provides descriptive statistics for all available data for variables in the analysis. Conflict data and latent judicial independence limit our sample size.

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
<i>Dependent Variables</i>					
TLE Attempted	1,414	0.031	.	0	1
TLE Successful: Pooled	1,414	0.018	.	0	1
TLE Successful: High Court	1,414	0.004	.	0	1
TLE Successful: Legislature	1,414	0.011	.	0	1
TLE Successful: Referendum	1,414	0.004	.	0	1
<i>Independent Variables</i>					
MID Conflict Present <sup>a</sup>	1,414	0.19	.	0	1
Conflict Duration	1,414	0.50	1.53	0.00	14.00
<i>Control Variables</i>					
Latent Judicial Independence <sup>a</sup>	1,414	0.42	0.22	0.02	0.97
Divided Party Control <sup>a</sup>	1,414	-0.14	1.12	-1.65	1.65
Constitutional Changes Enforcement: Not Required <sup>a</sup>	1,414	0.38	.	0	1
Constitutional Changes Enforcement: Contextual <sup>a</sup>	1,414	0.59	.	0	1
Constitutional Changes Enforcement: Required <sup>a</sup>	1,414	0.03	.	0	1
Populist Leader <sup>a</sup>	1,414	0.12	.	0	1
Extraordinary or Charismatic Leader <sup>a</sup>	1,414	0.17	1.34	-3.10	3.56
Political Polarization <sup>a</sup>	1,414	-0.08	1.10	-3.24	3.01
Constitutional Executive Power <sup>a</sup>	1,414	5.66	1.86	1.00	9.00
GDP per Capita <sup>a</sup>	1,414	5.47	5.42	0.31	38.39
Continent: Africa	1,414	0.68	.	0	1
Continent: Latin America	1,414	0.32	.	0	1
Year	1,414	2003.13	6.77	1989	2014
Minimum Fatality <sup>a</sup>	1,414	0.02	0.37	0	10

<sup>a</sup> Variable lagged one-year in analysis.

Table A1: *Descriptive statistics of data analyzed.* See Appendix Table A2 for descriptive statistics for all observations with TLE data present.

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
<i>Dependent Variables</i>					
TLE Attempted	2,015	0.03	.	0	1
TLE Successful: Pooled	2,015	0.02	.	0	1
TLE Successful: High Court	2,015	0.01	.	0	1
TLE Successful: Legislature	2,015	0.01	.	0	1
TLE Successful: Referendum	2,015	0.00	.	0	1
<i>Independent Variables</i>					
MID Conflict Present <sup>a</sup>	1,496	0.19	.	0	1
Conflict Duration	1,419	0.50	1.53	0.00	14.00
<i>Control Variables</i>					
Latent Judicial Independence <sup>a</sup>	1,545	0.42	0.22	0.02	0.97
Divided Party Control <sup>a</sup>	2,014	-0.12	1.10	-1.65	1.65
Constitutional Changes Enforcement: Not Required <sup>a</sup>	2,015	0.34	.	0	1
Constitutional Changes Enforcement: Contextual <sup>a</sup>	2,015	0.62	.	0	1
Constitutional Changes Enforcement: Required <sup>a</sup>	2,015	0.04	.	0	1
Populist Leader <sup>a</sup>	2,015	0.11	.	0	1
Extraordinary and Charismatic Leader <sup>a</sup>	2,014	0.14	1.33	-3.10	3.56
Political Polarization <sup>a</sup>	2,015	0.03	1.14	-3.24	3.43
Constitutional Executive Power <sup>a</sup>	2,015	5.50	2.05	1.00	9.00
GDP per Capita <sup>a</sup>	1,820	5.85	5.82	0.31	38.39
Continent: Africa	2,015	0.70	.	0	1
Continent: Latin America	2,015	0.30	.	0	1
Year	2,015	2007.81	9.29	1989	2023
Minimum Fatality <sup>a</sup>	1,496	0.03	0.40	0	10

<sup>a</sup> Variable lagged one-year.

Table A2: *Descriptive statistics for all variables where presidential term-limit evasion data are present.* See Table A1 for descriptive statistics of observations analyzed in this study.

Table A3 reports the characteristics of the TLE attempts and non-attempts from a survival-time approach. The analyzed data contains 66 countries and 2,008 country-year observations, with a mean of 30 records per country (ranging from 12 to 34). Countries enter the dataset as early as 1989 and as late as 2011. There are no gaps in the data, and the time at risk averages of 30 years. The TLE Attempts dataset includes 52 failures, with an average of 0.79 maximum of three attempts per country.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>Max</b>
No. of subjects	66				
No. of records	2,015	31	12	32	35
(First) entry time		1992	1988	1991	2011
(Final) exit time		2023	2019	2023	2023
Subjects with gap	0				
Time on gap if gap	0	.	.	.	.
Time at risk	2,015	30.5	12	32	35
Failures	57	0.86	0	1	3

Table A3: *Characteristics of presidential term-limit evasion attempts survival-time dataset for 66 countries between 1989 and 2023.*

The Successful TLE dataset contain 38 failure events, defined as accomplished term limit evasions, which occur across multiple years. The average number of failures per country is 0.58 and the maximum is three. We also know that seven countries experienced multiple evasions.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>Max</b>
No. of subjects	66				
No. of records	2,015	31	12	32	35
(First) entry time		1992	1988	1991	2011
(Final) exit time		2023	2019	2023	2023
Subjects with gap	0				
Time on gap if gap	0	.	.	.	.
Time at risk	2,015	30.5	12	32	35
Failures	38	0.58	0	0	3

Table A4: *Characteristics of successful presidential TLE survival-time dataset for 66 countries between 1989 and 2023.* See Appendix Table A3 for similar information on TLE attempts.

<i>Failure=TLE Attempt</i>	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<i>Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID)<sup>a</sup></i>				
MID Absent	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>		
MID Present	1.82 (0.58)	1.59 (0.52)		
Conflict Duration			1.12* (0.05)	1.14** (0.06)
Judicial Independence <sup>a</sup>		0.28 (0.29)		0.29 (0.31)
Divided Party Control <sup>a</sup>		0.82 (0.12)		0.81 (0.13)
Referendum Enforcement <sup>a</sup>				
Not Required		<i>Ref.</i>		<i>Ref.</i>
Contextual		1.26 (0.36)		1.22 (0.35)
Required		0.27** (0.12)		0.28** (0.13)
<i>Populist Leader<sup>a</sup></i>				
Not Populist		<i>Ref.</i>		<i>Ref.</i>
Populist		2.11* (0.64)		1.92 (0.68)
Extraordinary Leader <sup>a</sup>		1.16 (0.15)		1.18 (0.15)
Political Polarization <sup>a</sup>		0.80 (0.12)		0.81 (0.12)
Executive Power <sup>a</sup>		1.14 (0.11)		1.16 (0.12)
GDP per Capita <sup>a</sup>		✓		✓
Continent		✓		✓
Time Cubic Splines	✓	✓	✓	✓
AIC	391.15	382.13	391.29	380.86
BIC	417.42	460.94	417.56	459.67
Obs.	1,414	1,414	1,414	1,414
Countries	66	66	66	66
Failures	44	44	44	44

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

<sup>a</sup> Variable lagged one year.

Table A5: *Logistic regression model for repeated presidential term-limit evasion attempts.*

See Table 3 for primary analysis using survival-time model for multiple-failure event.

	Pooled		High Court		Legislature		Referendum	
<i>Failure=TLE Event</i>	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
<i>Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID)<sup>a</sup></i>								
MID Absent	<i>Ref.</i>		<i>Ref.</i>		<i>Ref.</i>		<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>
MID Present	1.302 (0.546)		<0.000*** (<0.000)		1.731 (0.945)		3.268 (2.797)	
Conflict Duration		1.215** (0.087)		0.775 (0.458)		1.191* (0.097)		1.380*** (0.134)
Judicial Independence <sup>a</sup>	0.112 (0.153)	0.176 (0.292)	3.662 (9.475)	30.575 (130.865)	0.094 (0.184)	0.064 (0.147)	<0.000* (0.001)	<0.000** (<0.000)
Divided Party Control <sup>a</sup>	0.714 (0.134)	0.730 (0.153)	0.532 (0.183)	0.516 (0.246)	0.802 (0.189)	0.870 (0.198)	0.680 (0.362)	0.270 (0.259)
<i>Referendum Enforcement<sup>a</sup></i>								
Not Required	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>
Contextual	1.020 (0.352)	0.677 (0.258)	0.703 (0.722)	0.858 (0.908)	1.034 (0.444)	0.614 (0.274)	0.900 (0.936)	0.438 (0.552)
Required	0.163*** (0.077)	0.128*** (0.069)	<0.000*** (<0.000)	<0.000*** (<0.000)	<0.000*** (<0.000)	<0.000*** (<0.000)	1.439 (2.127)	6.765 (22.651)
<i>Populist Leader<sup>a</sup></i>								
Not Populist	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>
Populist	1.814 (0.696)	1.696 (0.619)	<0.000*** (<0.000)	<0.000*** (<0.000)	3.420* (1.751)	3.308* (1.664)	4.595* (3.490)	4.947* (3.874)
Extraordinary Leader <sup>a</sup>	1.173 (0.162)	1.308 (0.216)	1.431 (0.642)	2.174 (1.171)	1.343 (0.295)	1.282 (0.269)	0.781 (0.304)	0.986 (0.522)
Political Polarization <sup>a</sup>	0.905 (0.148)	0.855 (0.176)	0.945 (0.291)	0.770 (0.229)	0.684 (0.151)	0.648 (0.191)	1.607* (0.298)	2.018* (0.570)
Executive Power <sup>a</sup>	1.324** (0.123)	1.314* (0.156)	2.081*** (0.457)	2.849*** (0.857)	1.302* (0.143)	1.320* (0.174)	1.262 (0.221)	1.109 (0.330)
GDP per Capita <sup>a</sup>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Continent	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>p</i>	0.354*** (0.076)	0.360*** (0.107)	0.017* (0.035)	<0.000* (0.001)	0.297*** (0.104)	0.361** (0.136)	0.326** (0.115)	0.395 (0.255)
AIC	-151.47	-131.95	-10.45	-0.65	-66.48	-62.70	-8.90	-10.21
BIC	-84.45	-68.90	56.57	62.40	0.54	0.35	58.12	52.84
Obs.	1968	1414	1968	1414	1968	1414	1968	1414
Countries	66	66	66	66	66	66	66	66
Failures	30	25	7	5	18	16	6	5

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Table A6: Competing risk parametric regression survival-time model for multiple-failure events of successful presidential TLEs. See Table 4 for primary analysis using survival-time model for multiple-failure event.

	Pooled		High Court		Legislature		Referendum	
<i>Failure=TLE Event</i>	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
<i>Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID)<sup>a</sup></i>								
MID Absent		<i>Ref.</i>		<i>Ref.</i>		<i>Ref.</i>		<i>Ref.</i>
MID Present		1.352 (0.623)		<0.001*** (<0.001)		1.525 (0.954)		8.225*** (5.125)
Conflict Duration	1.216** (0.083)		0.777 (0.459)		1.211* (0.110)		1.397*** (0.134)	
Minimum Fatality <sup>a</sup>	1.155 (0.192)	1.174 (0.170)	<0.001*** (<0.001)	1.382 (0.394)	<0.001*** (<0.001)	<0.001*** (<0.001)	1.638 (0.420)	1.486 (0.443)
Judicial Independence <sup>a</sup>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Divided Party Control <sup>a</sup>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Referendum Enforcement<sup>a</sup></i>								
Not Required	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>
Contextual	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Required	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Populist Leader<sup>a</sup></i>								
Not Populist	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Ref.</i>
Populist	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Extraordinary Leader <sup>a</sup>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Political Polarization <sup>a</sup>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Executive Power <sup>a</sup>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
GDP per Capita <sup>a</sup>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Continent	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>p</i>	0.342*** (0.101)	0.388*** (0.102)	<0.001* (0.001)	<0.001 (0.001)	0.364** (0.136)	0.408** (0.140)	0.378 (0.271)	0.304 (0.201)
AIC	-137.80	-133.93	1.35	-0.83	-61.26	-58.99	-8.89	-10.71
BIC	-69.50	-65.63	69.65	67.47	7.05	9.31	59.41	57.60
Obs.	1414	1414	1414	1414	1414	1414	1414	1414
Countries	66	66	66	66	66	66	66	66
Failures	26	26	5	5	16	16	5	5

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Table A7: Competing risk parametric regression survival-time model for multiple-failure events of successful presidential TLEs. See Table 4 for primary analysis using survival-time model for multiple-failure event.