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Article contents

[Abstract](#)
[Footnotes](#)
[References](#)

Democracy by Mistake: How the Errors of Autocrats Trigger Transitions to Freer Government

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DANIEL TREISMAN 


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Abstract

How does democracy emerge from authoritarian rule? Certain influential theories contend that incumbents deliberately choose to share or surrender power. They do so to prevent revolution, motivate citizens to fight wars, incentivize governments to provide public goods, outbid elite rivals, or limit factional violence. Examining the history of all democratizations since 1800, I show that such deliberate-choice arguments may help explain up to about one-third of the cases. In more than two-thirds, the evidence suggests that democratization occurred not because incumbents chose it but because, while trying to prevent it, they made mistakes that weakened their hold on power. Rather than being granted by farsighted elites or forced on them by the rise of new classes, democracy appears to have spread most often because of incumbents' missteps that triggered previously latent factors.