Treisman’ research (2020) examines the drivers behind authoritarian regimes transitioning to democracies from a historical perspective. His empirical approach classifies 270 historical cases of regime change (1800–2015), combining process tracing with quantitative trends, to investigate whether these transitions are deliberate or unintended. Treisman employs comparative historical analysis, systematically categorising the reasons dictators relinquish power. He identifies cases where leaders miscalculated their actions, inadvertently triggering democratic transitions—such as calling elections they expected to win, misjudging opposition strength, or enacting reforms to appease elites that unintentionally facilitated further democratisation.

His mixed-methods approach combines qualitative process tracing (examining event sequences and decision-making errors) with quantitative data to assess broader trends. Although he avoids making strong causal claims, the process tracing approach helps bring out the mechanisms behind democratisation, including patterns of unintended democratic emergence, not just correlations.

Treisman’s work builds on rational choice theory, which assumes political actors are strategic, goal-oriented decision-makers conducting cost-benefit assessments to maximise their interests. He applies this lens to show that autocrats often make strategic errors due to bounded rationality—operating with incomplete information, cognitive biases, or external pressures. Rather than acting with perfect foresight, autocrats make flawed judgments, leading to unintended democratic transitions.

By emphasising unintended consequences, Treisman extends rational choice theory beyond its deterministic versions. He challenges the assumption that leaders always optimise their strategies to retain power, supporting alternative explanations of regime change, including demonstrating how miscalculations and unintended knock-on effects often destabilise authoritarian rule.

Treisman’s epistemological stance is primarily positivist and deductive, as he seeks generalisable patterns, applies a structured analytical framework, and relies on historical evidence to test assumptions about democratisation. However, his approach also draws on elements of historical institutionalism and pragmatism. He acknowledges path dependency—how past decisions shape present political trajectories—and contextual variations in democratisation, rather than assuming uniform causal mechanisms.

Unlike some strictly positivist studies, Treisman avoids a purely theoretically deterministic approach, by emphasising empirical patterns over rigid causal claims. His recognition of uncertainty, strategic miscalculations, and contextual variation aligns with pragmatism, which prioritises empirical observation over rigid theoretical frameworks. By not arguing that democratisation is an inevitable consequence of autocratic mistakes, his study reflects a nuanced, empirically grounded perspective rather than a purely positivist or rationalist approach.

**In your own words, provide the key theoretical claim(s) of this article. Identify and discuss the nature of these claims, as well as how the author aligns theory with empirics.**

Treisman’s central theoretical claim is that democratisation often occurs not through deliberate choice but as a result of unintended consequences, particularly miscalculations by authoritarian leaders. He categorises regime transitions into deliberate democracy, democratisation by mistake, and unintended but avoidable democratisation, arguing that dictators frequently lose power through errors in judgement—mismanaging elections, alienating elites, or miscalculating international pressures.

The study shows that bounded rationality, cognitive biases, and uncertainty shape autocrats’ decisions. While rationalist models assume strategic calculation, Treisman highlights how leaders make flawed assessments based on incomplete information, leading to democratic transitions they neither intended nor foresaw. This challenges deterministic rational choice assumptions that leaders always optimise to retain power, instead showing that strategic mistakes can trigger democratisation, while still grounded in rationalist theory.

This structured typology makes democratisation appear more predictable and classifiable—suggesting a logic of transition based on patterns of leader miscalculation. However, this retrospective classification carries subjectivity: any event, even those influenced by deep structural forces, can be framed as an “unintended mistake” in hindsight. While Treisman’s analysis does not explicitly endorse democracy as the ideal outcome, it implicitly treats democratisation as an inevitable end-point, and explains it through rationalist decision-making. This risks under-emphasising alternative explanations, such as long-term socio-economic transformations, institutional decay, or international pressures, which may explain why some mistakes lead to democratisation and others do not.

This approach risks overstating agency at the expense of structural forces. While the analysis convincingly links leader miscalculations to regime change, it gives less attention to how broader social, economic, and technological shifts shape both mistakes and democratisation, creating potential endogeneity issues. Globalisation, economic crises, rising literacy, mass media, and elite fragmentation all influence regime stability, yet these deeper forces receive limited focus compared to individual leadership errors. A dictator calling an election expecting to win may miscalculate, but the fact that democratic institutions are strong enough to remove them suggests that prior systemic transformations—not just leader choices—conditioned the likelihood of transition.

The study does not fully account for the psychological inevitability of miscalculations. If rulers consistently make errors, this may not be due to isolated misjudgements but rather an inherent consequence of cognitive biases, overconfidence, and elite competition. While the analysis frames mistakes as external shocks, an alternative theoretical standpoint could build on political psychology and behavioural institutionalism to argue that miscalculations are a structural feature of autocratic regimes. If leadership errors are predictable, then democratisation may stem less from individual strategic failures and more from the systemic fragility of authoritarian rule, where factionalism and successive crises create recurring instability. Rather than challenging Treisman’s claims, this perspective could build on them empirically, showing that unintended democratisation is not just a product of leader missteps but also the inherent volatility of autocratic governance.

Treisman provides a compelling empirical framework, but his approach assumes a degree of historical determinism in how democratisation unfolds. By focusing on miscalculations as the mechanism of transition, the study risks downplaying the larger, intertwined historical, economic, and psychological factors that make regime change possible.

**Does this paper make any original and/or significant contributions? Discuss. Also, can/should the author extend their research to a different case? If yes, what is the scope condition? What would a possible case choice using the same condition?**

Treisman makes a notable contribution by reframing democratisation as not just the result of strategic choices but also miscalculations, misjudgements, and misinformation. By demonstrating how bounded rationality and unintended consequences shape regime transitions, the study highlights the fragility of authoritarian rule and the role of human error in political change.

The study assumes that mistakes are avoidable but does not fully account for their psychological inevitability. If misjudgements result from cognitive biases and overconfidence, are they not inherent to governance itself? This suggests that all leaders, including those in democracies, are prone to strategic missteps. A broader perspective could assess whether authoritarian rule is structurally predisposed to self-destruction due to its centralised decision-making.

If mistakes are central, what about their opposite? Could a similar empirical approach identify “best practices” for autocrats to stay in power? This might reveal whether longevity also depends on avoiding Treisman’s identified errors. Would such an analysis further challenge rationalist assumptions by showing that stability, like failure, is shaped by non-rational factors such as chance, misinformation control, and elite co-optation?

A useful extension could examine China’s post-Mao leadership transitions. Unlike many autocracies that collapse due to miscalculation, China has not undertaken a democratic transition despite successive crises. While Treisman examines regime types, he does not explicitly test whether personalist dictatorships are more prone to errors than one-party states, where institutions may buffer against leader misjudgements. Military regimes may also follow different miscalculation patterns. These distinctions could clarify whether democratisation by mistake is leader-driven or structurally conditioned.

From a Foucauldian perspective, what appears as individual “miscalculation” may also reflect deeper processes of subjectivation, where leaders’ perceptions and decisions are shaped by dominant discourses, institutional norms, and power relations—calling into question how “free” or strategic their actions truly are.

Treisman acknowledges external factors but does not fully explore how global connectivity and transnational pressures influence leader miscalculations. Could the fall of the Berlin Wall have occurred in isolation, or did economic interdependence, media exposure, and diplomatic shifts shape elite perceptions? Treisman finds that democratisation by mistake increased from 59% in the first historical wave to 79% in the third. This raises questions about whether this reflects a genuine rise in leader miscalculations, growing external pressures, or improved historical granularity over time. Today, does digital technology amplify miscalculations by accelerating misinformation, elite fragmentation, and shifts in public sentiment? Despite Treisman’s analysis aiming for global coverage, there may be biases related to data availability and conceptual framing, particularly favouring Western cases with more documented transitions, questioning the applicability of his model across diverse political and cultural contexts.

Whilst Treisman’s study advances our understanding of unintended democratisation, and establishes correlations between leader miscalculations and democratisation, proving causality remains difficult. Future research could refine his framework by incorporating the psychological inevitability of mistakes, structural constraints, and global forces—building on his empirical strengths and addressing broader conditions that shape regime change. Additionally, a synthetic control method—comparing real-world transitions to simulated counterfactual regimes—could help isolate whether mistakes directly cause democratisation.