

“A Theory of Aristocracy”

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Abstract

Why did aristocratic rule persist for centuries in established states, even when rulers had strong incentives to appoint capable administrators, and why did some societies eventually replace aristocracy with bureaucracy, while others did not? We study aristocracy as a form of political patronage in which rulers assign administrative authority and tenure to kin and close adherents. We argue that aristocratic administration is not simply the product of favoritism, but reflects a trade-off between loyalty and talent. While both attributes improve governance, maintaining talent requires repeated selection, which limits tenure and thus loyalty. In settings where identifying or monitoring high-ability individuals is difficult, regimes instead rely on aristocrats, whose long tenure aligns their interests with regime survival. Improvements in literacy or bureaucratic monitoring increase the appeal of bureaucratic selection, but this transition is contested because higher bureaucratic quality also strengthens regime survival, indirectly enhancing the loyalty and effectiveness of aristocrats. The framework yields predictions about how technology, socioeconomic inequality, ethnic politics, and territorial scale shape the timing and extent of bureaucratization. We use this framework to examine the historical transition from aristocracy to bureaucracy, with particular attention to China, the world's first bureaucratic state.