

Policy Point – Counterpoint:
Is Democracy the Best Form of Governance?
Aristotelian vs. Platonic Thought

George H. Sabine opened the Preface to his classic textbook *A History of Political Theory* with the statement that “theories of politics are themselves a part of politics.”¹ A pragmatist by intellectual commitment, Sabine’s point was that the study of the classics of political thought is an engagement with real, relevant, and contemporary implications. Indeed, it is precisely the practical import of a great text that renders it a classic and that lends it that nexus that draws the modern student into the text and where they find insights that become part of their politics. Of course, it was always this way, in our Classics of Political Thought course we approach the study of Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Politics* much as Sabine would have done, contextually, examining the conflicts and tensions not only within the texts but in the relationship between the political thinkers and the democratic *polis* of ancient Athens. From the beginning then, we can see that the question and contestation of democracy helped to form these texts, provided the grains of sand if you will around which the pearls of wisdom formed and crystallized. Yet by reading these texts, we can still profitably reflect about the problems and prospects of democracy. Is it the best form of governance? Here, we present a point and counter-point on this question by my students Jasmine Ellison and Chase Sherrod, respectively, taking up the insights of Aristotle then Plato. Jasmine and Chase reconsider the problems of democracy in conceptual terms that the classics teach us, including conflict between social classes, conflict that then as now threatens the very integrity of the *polis* itself, for one the thing the classics quickly teach us is that political engagement while virtuous is not for the faint of heart. By recapitulating

classic themes, these students demonstrate to us how timely and alive these texts remain, as John Locke once said of reason, for those “who will but consult” them.²

Point: The Aristotelian Perspective

From an Aristotelian perspective, a democracy is the best form of government. A Platonist would cite Plato’s *Republic* to dispute this, noting a democracy derives from the anarchical nature of an individual, resulting in tyranny. However, this Platonic perspective on democracy does not take into account that Aristotle described four types of democracies, and the type of democracy a Platonist is most likely to imagine is not the one Aristotle envisioned as the finest form. Instead, the best form of government is a democracy in which there is a multitude of free, poor working men, such as farmers, that outnumber the rich population. This form of democracy succeeds because both the rich and the poor participate in the election process. Both groups conduct audits of those in office, and serve in the courts to ensure that those elected to office are capable people. This is the ideal form of government because in this usage, democracy accounts for the preeminent poor population as well as the wealthy.

However, to understand what this democracy is, one must understand what a city-state is, what a citizen is, and the relationship that the citizens share with one another. Most importantly, one must understand what a democracy is from the Aristotelian perspective. Per Aristotle’s *Politics*, human beings make up the city-state by nature.³ A city-state is a partnership amongst the free and those who are free rule the city-state.⁴ A democracy is a rule in which the multitude have authority.⁵ Freedom is the foundation of democracy. To be free means that one can live as he pleases, with the understanding that one can be ruled but can also be the ruler since equality depends on number, not merit, as it pertains to a democracy.⁶ As Aristotle wrote, a

citizen is the person who has a share in ruling and being ruled and can serve as a juror and hold public office. The overall excellence of all citizens requires the ability and knowledge to both rule free men and being ruled. This results in justice to the overall political good.⁷ According to *Politics*, justice is the common advantage, and the multitude holds the common advantage. The citizens' goal is to preserve the system of government, which means preserving the partnership of the free, both for those of the rich and the poor, for they are all citizens.

Hence, in this Aristotelian democracy there is a greater need to balance everyone's desires, which can only be achieved by educating citizens about the laws, for when the laws are taught, there is room for debates and discussions about them. This creates trust amongst the citizens, and the rich and the poor feel equal in terms of power.⁸ Therefore, the Platonic idea that the individual, selfish, nature of man will ultimately lead to the destruction of a democracy is false. In the best form of democracy, the rich and the poor come together because they understand that to maintain their partnership they must act as a single person—a unit. This dismisses the Platonic idea that if the wealthy lack power, it will cause the poor to fear their freedom will be taken away, and will lead to the rise of a demagogue who will pit socioeconomic factions against each other.

It is necessary to have both the wealthy and the poor participate in the process of ruling and being ruled. The mass of poor men who outnumber the rich in population, according to Aristotle, will be too preoccupied with making a living to want to assemble. To include them, in the best form of democracy, there are sparsely-held assembly meetings and short court sessions. To demand as little time as possible accommodates the working poor's constraints and promotes their presence in office. By allowing the poor to participate, they will be assured that there are no wealthy persons against the common advantage.⁹ In turn, the wealthy's participation

in the assembly and court sessions, as well as a place in office, will serve the same purpose of overseeing that there are no poor persons against them.¹⁰ This system indirectly insinuates that these socioeconomic groups can check one another.¹¹ One may say that this is impossible due to the multitude of the poor. However, as stated earlier, both citizens of each group serve to protect the partnership of the city-state, which preserves this Aristotelian form of democracy.

Although it is not quite the same as the Aristotelian form, the United States has one of the most capable forms of democracy today. However, based on the Bright Line Watch U.S. Democratic Survey, conducted by 1,571 political scientists after the election of Donald Trump in 2016, the United States is failing and underperforming in beneficial areas essential to a democracy.¹² Unlike the Aristotelian democracy, indirectly but successfully, inserting checks and balances, the survey concludes that there is growing “skepticism that Congress and the Constitution can effectively limit executive power in the U.S. democracy.”¹³ The survey also states that the United States’ government officials have used public office for private gains, promoting the individuals’ desires over the population as a whole; a scenario which both Aristotle and Plato agreed could eventually lead to the fall of democracy.¹⁴ This combination has had a profound negative impact on civil behaviors in the United States since Donald Trump has come into office. One can only conclude that without these Aristotelian characteristics of democracy, the United States can have a capable Democracy, but it will not have a successful democracy.

In conclusion, this Aristotelian form of democracy where the multitude of poor, working, men, greatly outweigh the rich, yet all participate in the process of ruling and being ruled, is the best form of government. It dismisses the Platonist idea that the nature of man is selfish because in this form of democracy the rich and the poor join as a unit to act as good

citizens to carry out the overall political good, justice. Therefore, in this democracy, there is no room for a demagogue or socioeconomic factions fighting against one another because they are equal in power and their individual desires have been leveled out due to the discussions and debates carried on amongst them through the education of laws, allowing them to trust one another. Most importantly, this specific form of an Aristotelian democracy is the best form of government because of the lack of conflict between the rich and the poor allows it to be the most stable government of them all, promoting its preservation.

Counterpoint: The Platonic Perspective

Democracy, from a Platonic point of view, is the precursor to the concept of anarchy. Per Plato, democracy is created out of an oligarchic governance in which the poor have taken control of the city-state.¹⁵ Those individuals who partake in a democracy are never truly free, but instead the system leads to every citizen appealing to their own interests. This self-indulging nature leads to the anarchical nature Plato despised. A democracy is not terrible. Athens, itself, was a democracy for the vast majority of Plato's life. However, it is what democracy leads to that destroys any argument one may have in regards to why a democratic form of governance is the best form. Democracy masks anarchy under an erroneous assumption of freedom.¹⁶ It is this false sense of freedom that ultimately leads to the downfall of Aristotle's preferred form of governance. If the noble tyranny could be prevented, democracy would be a suitable form of governance, however, no justice can be found in this form of governance. This is not to say that the tyrannical government Plato spoke of is the sole reason to be wary of democracy. Other factors, such as the presumption of extreme poverty and wealth keep a democratic government from being just and create the perfect mixture to erect a tyrannical governance. In a

governmental structure, such as democracy, there will always be the wealthy and the poor.

Ironically, it is this same wealth that leads to the destruction of the oligarchy.¹⁷

As wealth is an unnecessary desire, it has no place in a just *polis*. A wealth disparity leads to a demagogue who pits the two differing socioeconomic groups against each other. As Saxonhouse asserts, "*democratia* then comes into being whenever the poor, not weakened by the overindulgence and the laziness of the rich, are victorious."¹⁸ Hence, the democratic regime allows for a mob mentality type of rule and a demagogue that can play on both factions' fear. This tyrant, as Plato referred to him, maintains his dominance over the *polis* by using tactical measures like war. In Platonic thought, noble tyranny is the direct result of Aristotle's preferred form of governance. Democracy only gives the outward appearance of freedom; the individuals in such a form of governance are never truly free. The anarchical nature of a democracy leads to the creation of factions. Factions, by its very definition, lead to a divided *polis*.

There is only one way to avoid this tyrannical form of governance, and that is to avoid a democracy in its totality. As Plato pointed out, monarchies lead to oligarchies and oligarchies to democracies.¹⁹ Plato asserted that the governances will lead to the ultimate destruction of the government due to the city-state being unjust.²⁰ To ensure that the *polis* is protected, it must be founded on justice. If the individuals of the *polis* set aside their unnecessary desires, such as wealth and pleasure, they will find that Plato's Republic is the best form of governance.²¹ The desire for wealth and pleasure only detracts from what Plato referred to as necessary desires. As Plato alluded to in *Crito*, the citizens of a *polis* are bound to the laws and the constitution of their *polis*.²² The emphasis on the good of the republic is the basis of which Plato defined his concept of justice.

Therefore, the only way to evade a democratic governance is to create Plato's *Republic*. This will provide for the health of the city along with the health of everyone's soul. "The Myth of the Metals" is an important fiction that does more than just give the citizenry a reason to accept his Republic. This piece of fiction also serves to inform individuals of the virtues needed for both the citizen and the *polis* to remain healthy. As Plato wrote, the philosopher-kings will be those in charge and have gold infused in their soul. The auxiliaries serve as the protectors of the city, and have silver infused in their soul. Lastly, the producing class will be told that their souls are infused with bronze, which will decree that they work as producers for the *polis*. In his *Republic*, only the necessary desires of the citizenry will be met. As Brown asserts, "at the center of his model is a principle of specialization: each person should perform just the task to which he is best suited."²³ This rules out the accumulation of wealth, honor, and pride. Thus, the factions created in a democracy will have no place in Plato's system of governance. Without factions, the demagogue that resides in the democratic governance will not belong in the *Republic*. He stunts the unnecessary desire of pride by asserting that metals cannot be mixed.²⁴ Thus, those of a bronze class cannot strive to become philosopher-kings. Thus, the pride and honor associated with status will be non-existent, which will also prevent the rise of factions within his system.

Plato's assertions, pertaining to the evils of democracy, as discussed in his *Republic*, can be exemplified in contemporary society. One such example stems from the United States' Presidential Election in 2016. In this election, two candidates sought to pit two separate factions against each other. This strategy, in its totality, potentially led to the unexpected victory of a candidate who relied on fear to gain the populace vote. Specifically, the candidate focused on how the rich were exploiting the middle and lower classes. As Plato suggested, this is how the

demagogue seeks to capture control. The noble tyranny begins as one individual creates divisive factions and pits them against one another. One of the main campaign mantras that the current President relied on was his notion of ridding the U.S. Government from corruption. In doing so, the individual divided the elite and the non-elite into two separate groups. This is the type of behavior Plato asserted that a demagogue would use. Those who are not wealthy fear that they are being taken advantage of by the affluent.

As Plato noted, "Hence, democracy, and only democracy, lays the foundation of tyranny—the most intense freedom lays the foundation for the heaviest and the fiercest slavery."²⁵ The anarchical nature of democracy is masked with the illusion of freedom that humans erroneously crave. This longing for freedom, as Plato suggested, leads to a hegemonic figure pulling the strings to a society built on unnecessary desires. The poor and the wealthy strive to fight for their own place in society, while the tyrant and his cohorts control the *polis*. The self-proclaimed freedom of the citizenry ultimately leads to the slave-like status that Plato feared. As the previous U.S. presidential debate shows, Plato's theory, as it pertains to the inevitability of the failure of democracy, is completely exemplified.

In sum, Platonic thought leads to the conclusion that democracy is a state of anarchy that is masked with a delusional sense of freedom. The individuals in this government are never truly free. They are bound to their unnecessary desires, which are both unhealthy to the soul and the *polis*. The sole purpose of the individual is to provide for the good of the community. A democracy only strives to provide for the individual. Furthermore, democracy will inevitably lead to the tyrannical demagogue, who will pit the two socioeconomic parties of the democracy against one another. To avoid this noble tyranny, the *polis* must be made in line with the concept of justice. Plato's *Republic* does just this by eliminating the unnecessary desires that are desired

in a democracy. In the Republic, wealth, pleasure, and honor will be non-existent. In its place, will be the virtues of courage, wisdom, moderation and justice that will be noticed in the souls of all three classes of the Republic. The goal of the individual is to serve the community. Plato's ideology leads to the conclusion that this is unattainable in a democratic form of governance.

Disclaimer: The article is intended to display the philosophy and ideologies of prominent individuals in the realm of classic political thought. The thoughts and ideas presented in this article are not those of the authors.

ENDNOTES

¹ George H. Sabine, "Preface to the First Edition," in *A History of Political Theory*, Revised ed. (New York: Henry Holt & Co. 1950), xi.

² Steven Cahn, "Second Treatise of Government," *Classics of Political and Moral Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press Inc, 2002), p. 451.

³ Aristotle, "Politics" in *Ibid.* 1253a: 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1279a: 21, 1255b: 16-21.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1281a: 40-1281b: 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1317a: 40-1317b: 13.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1282b: 16-8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1310a: 12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1308b: 31.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1309a: 14.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1309b: 35.

¹² Clair Claime Miller, "The Upshot: Civics Lessons; Democracy in America: How Is It Doing," *The New York Times*, February 23, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/23/upshot/democracy-in-america-how-is-it-doing.html> [accessed March 29, 2017].

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Steven Cahn, "Politics," in *Classics of Political and Moral Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press Inc, 2002), p. 143, 557a.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 148, 563d.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 147, 561c.

¹⁸ Arlene W. Saxonhouse, "Democracy, Equality, and Eide: A Radical View from Book 8 of Plato's Republic," *American Political Science Review* (1998): p. 278.

¹⁹ Steven Cahn, *Classics of Political & Moral Philosophy*, p. 134, Plato, "Republic," 544c-d.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 134-152, 544a-152c.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 144-145, 558d-559d.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 29, 51b-c.

²³Eric Brown, "Plato's Ethics and Politics in The Republic," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016) <https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=plato-ethics-politics> [accessed March 2, 2017].

²⁴Steven Cahn, *Classics of Political & Moral Philosophy*, p. 68, "Republic" 415a.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 148, 564a.