

# The Principles of Plato and Aristotle and their Relationship to Today's Democracy

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## Abstract

Plato and Aristotle were two of the most famous philosophers of Western political thought. While they shared many common beliefs, their views on democracy and governing differed. For example, Plato believed that philosopher-kings should rule the state, whereas Aristotle argued that polity—a combination of democracy and oligarchy with a strong middle class—is the most effective form of governance.

Despite their differences, Plato and Aristotle shared a common commitment to a just and virtuous political system. While Plato emphasised the importance of virtue, Aristotle argued for a system promoting fairness. However, both stressed the need for justice, equality, and civic participation to improve democracy. Through the intellectual rigour of Plato's philosopher-kings and the practical wisdom of Aristotle's mixed constitution, today's democracies can address the growing challenges of inequality, political disengagement, and corruption.

## Introduction

Plato and Aristotle were two of the most famous philosophers in the history of Western political thought. Their views on politics and the state have provided a unique perspective on man and human nature. *Plato* (428–347 BC) was a Greek philosopher and founder of the Platonist school, the first Western university. Aristotle (384–322 BC) was a renowned philosopher and one of the most influential thinkers in Western philosophy.

Plato and Aristotle lived during a time when ancient Greek philosophers sought to understand politics and governance (Aliu, 2018). While they shared many common beliefs, their views on governing and democracy differed. Understanding their differences requires looking at the historical and social context of the period in which they lived. In Ancient Athens, citizens directly participated in governing and decision-making (Tridimas, 2017). Because they believed democracy was vulnerable to manipulation, Plato and Aristotle questioned its long-term effectiveness.

Today's democracy faces many challenges, including political polarization, corruption, social inequality, and declining citizen participation. Plato and Aristotle foresaw these and described them in their early writings. This paper examines these principles in the context of today's democracy and discusses how moral leadership, engaged citizens, and justice can strengthen it.

## Political Philosophy

Political science studies the duties and responsibilities of politicians and statesmen. According to ancient Greek scholars, the role of the politician is that of a lawgiver, who governs through the authority of a written constitution. In *The Nicomachean Ethics* (350 BC), Aristotle describes the role of politicians as "to secure and preserve the good of the city appears to be something greater and more complete: the good

of the individual by himself is certainly desirable enough, but that of a nation and of cities is nobler and more divine" (Aristotle, 2011, p. 3).

Plato's *The Republic* (c. 375 BC) and Aristotle's *Politics* (c. 350 BC) discuss the role of society, the origin of the state, and political philosophy (Aliu, 2018). Each believed political action should preserve "existing norms and values" (Zannat et al., 2020, p. 44) while promoting "good" (p. 44). However, in their search for political truth, Plato and Aristotle differed in their interpretation of politics and governing. For example, Plato believed that rulers should be "both a philosopher and guardian" (Duncan & Steinberger, 1990, p. 1317), suggesting that aristocracy was the best form of government (Aliu, 2018). In comparison, Aristotle argued that polity, a combination of democracy and oligarchy with a strong middle class, is the most effective form of governance (Aristotle, 1958). Aristotle reasoned that a strong middle class holds leaders accountable for their decisions while promoting political stability (Aristotle, 1958).

Aristotle considered the state an "imitation" of the family (Zannat et al., 2020, p. 45). He understood that the purpose of the state is to encourage happiness (Aliu, 2018, p. 39). In comparison, Plato believed the state was created to satisfy the needs of the people (Aliu, 2018).

While they differed in their understanding of the state's purpose, Plato and Aristotle held similar views on governing. For example, each distrusted democracy, believing it fails to ensure that only the most qualified are chosen to govern (Plato, 2000, pp. 113-116), is disruptive to the family unit (Habib, 2013, p.1), and encourages "inordinate indulgence in appetite and sensation" (Habib, 2013, p.1). Plato said, "democracy does not provide governance for the most capable people... it contains many deficiencies through the concept of general equality" (Aliu, 2018, p. 37). Plato concluded that democracy is "so attractive and so headstrong, from which I believe tyranny is born" (Plato, 2000, p. 277). As an alternative, aristocracy "provides leadership by the most capable people, and the proper dependence of all strata in the society is ensured" (Aliu, 2018, p. 37).

Plato and Aristotle also differed on how political philosophy should be discussed. For example, Plato contended that political philosophy can only be communicated through poetry and discussion (Zannat et al., 2020). He described this style as the "language of the poets" (Zannat et al., 2020, p. 44). In comparison, Aristotle argued that political philosophy should be expressed through simple, ordinary language (Zannat et al., 2020).

## **Plato's Contribution to Modern Democracy**

### **Philosopher-Kings: Ethical Leadership and Accountability**

Plato's philosopher-king is a just ruler who governs with wisdom and virtue. Today, many democracies face leadership crises, with politicians often prioritizing their interests over those of their citizens. Plato's preference for ruling by philosopher-kings, therefore, is a formal accusation against leaders who lack moral character and integrity.

Leaders in today's democracy must have a strong moral compass. Plato argued that personal integrity and long-term vision are more important than short-term popularity, requiring public officials to adhere to strict ethical standards and face consequences for corruption and dishonesty. Plato believed that honesty improves public confidence.

### **Education and Informed Citizenship: Cultivating a Virtuous Public**

Plato believed that education is essential to democracies. In *The Republic*, he reasoned that only through education can rulers effectively govern. Besides improving knowledge, Plato said education improves jus-

tice and self-discipline.

In the context of modern democracy, Plato understood that civic education promotes a more informed citizenry. This is particularly important when considering the challenges faced by modern democracies, including low voter turnout, misinformation, and political polarization. To address these issues, Plato called for comprehensive civic education, believing that democracy would become more resistant to manipulation with greater public education.

### **Justice and the Common Good: Shaping Fair Public Policies**

Plato believed that a system founded on justice encourages social happiness. He refused to acknowledge individualism and personal self-interest. Instead, he argued the need for a system that promotes integrity and the common good.

Modern democracies face challenges of inequality, with power and wealth concentrated in the hands of a few. Plato argued that addressing inequality requires adopting policies that ensure the equal distribution of resources to all citizens, including education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. However, expanding public services requires abandoning individualism and adopting policies emphasizing universal care. By doing so, Plato argued that modern democracies may become more just and inclusive.

### **Aristotle's Contribution to Modern Democracy**

#### **Governing for the Common Good**

In *Politics* (350 B.C.E.), Aristotle provides a more subtle view of democracy and politics. While he acknowledges democracy's limitations, he also recognizes its potential benefits. Aristotle evaluates governance by the actions of rulers and whether they govern for the common good or personal gain. He argues that a state governed by a mix of democracy and oligarchy is the most stable form of government because it promotes fairness and stability. He justifies his conviction by arguing that the purpose of the state is to help its citizens lead a good life (Aristotle, 2011).

Among Aristotle's most important contributions to political theory is his emphasis on the middle class as a stabilizing social and political force. He argues that a strong middle class prevents extreme wealth and poverty, reduces social conflict, and ensures more balanced governance (Aristotle, 1958).

#### **Mixed Constitution: Ensuring Balanced Representation**

Aristotle favored a mixed constitution, blending elements of democracy, aristocracy, and monarchy to offset what he saw as the pitfalls of pure democracy and oligarchy. Aristotle argued that in a democracy, the masses may become tyrannical, while in an oligarchy, social elites dominate. The best solution, he believed, is a mixed system that incorporates the benefits of all three forms of governance.

A mixed constitution provides balanced representation. For example, in the United States, the Senate is composed of 100 senators, two from each state. The House of Representatives comprises 435 seats, apportioned among the 50 states based on population, and six seats for non-voting delegates from U.S. territories and the District of Columbia. The advantage of a mixed system of government is the assurance that no single group has disproportionate power over the other (Biondi, C. A., 2007).

#### **Civic Engagement and Participation: Strengthening Democratic Institutions**

Aristotle emphasized civic virtue and active participation in political life. He believed that democracy flourishes when citizens actively participate in public affairs, not just by voting, but also by engaging in

public debates, joining political organizations, and contributing to community affairs. The need for increased political participation is more urgent today, as democracies struggle with voter apathy and growing distrust of government.

Modern democracies can improve political participation by creating more opportunities for citizens to engage in political processes. These can include participatory budgeting, where citizens have a say in how government funds are allocated, and interactive forums designed to engage citizens in discussions about public policy issues. Additionally, digital platforms encourage public participation by facilitating discussion groups before policy decisions are made. These approaches can help strengthen modern democracies by ensuring citizens feel a sense of ownership and accountability over their future.

### **The Rule of Law: Ensuring Fairness and Accountability**

Aristotle argued that the rule of law is essential for the functioning of democracy. He believed that laws should not be subject to the whims of politicians but grounded in reason and the common good. Aristotle's insistence on the rule of law can guide modern democracies toward greater fairness, including reforms that promote equal opportunity regardless of wealth or social status. Examples include reforming the criminal justice system to eliminate racial discrimination and mass incarceration. Above all, Aristotle believed in the need for a legal system to be just and fair, emphasizing laws that are equally applied to prevent corruption and restore public trust.

### **Integrating Plato and Aristotle's Principles**

While both Plato and Aristotle sought to define justice and governing, their philosophical approaches differed. For example, Plato emphasized bureaucratic governance, where the most educated and wisest rule, while Aristotle believed in a more inclusive system where laws and institutions evolve based on experience. Both acknowledged the dangers of democracy and the need for a well-ordered society.

Plato viewed democracy as a flawed system vulnerable to social and political instability, whereas Aristotle believed that constitutional rules provide more balanced and virtuous governing. They both rejected absolute monarchy, believing that a political system should serve the interests of the people, rather than those of its leaders. However, despite their differences, they shared a common commitment to a just and virtuous political system.

While Plato emphasized the importance of virtue and knowledgeable leadership, Aristotle advocated for a mixed system that ensures fairness and stability. Both philosophers emphasized the importance of justice, equality, and civic engagement in enhancing democracy. By blending the intellectual rigor of Plato's philosopher-kings with the practical wisdom of Aristotle's mixed constitution, modern democracies can address the growing challenges of inequality, political disengagement, and corruption. These values offer opportunities to create a more ethical and accountable political system that prioritizes fairness and the common good.

### **Conclusions**

The principles of Plato and Aristotle offer valuable guidance for improving modern democracy. Their interpretation of leadership, civic engagement, justice, and the rule of law provides a roadmap for reforming governments that fail to meet their citizens' needs. By applying Plato's ideas on virtuous leadership and Aristotle's vision of balanced governance and active civic participation, modern democracies can build stronger institutions. By revisiting their teachings, Plato and Aristotle remind us

that democracy is not just about holding elections, but also about cultivating virtuous citizens, ensuring fair representation, and promoting the common good.

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