

Aristotle's social choice

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Abstract

We describe Aristotle's mathematical model of weighted voting to explain and implement decision-making in democracies, oligarchies and the mixed states that combine elements of both systems. This model, originally presented in textual form, extends the known history of social choice theory back 450 years to the mid-4th century BC. The fact that the origins of the social choice theory go back to one of the most influential thinkers of all time enhances its scientific and historical significance.

Keywords: Social choice, history, Aristotle, democracy, oligarchy, mixed state, weighted voting.

JEL Classification: D71

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Aristotle, as a philosopher, is in many ways very different from all his predecessors. He is the first to write like a professor: his treatises are systematic, his discussions are divided into heads, he is a professional teacher, not an inspired prophet.

Bertrand Russel (1872–1970)¹

1 Introduction

The seminal book *Classics of Social Choice* by [McLean and Urken 1995] traces the origins of social choice theory back to the second century AD, citing a case of strategic voting in the Roman Senate analyzed in a personal letter by [Pliny the Younger 105]. This book collects and contextualizes, among other things, the anticipation of the Borda and Condorcet voting methods by Ramon Llull (1232?–1315) and the premature discovery of the Borda count by Nicholas Cusanus (1401–1464).

We argue that the origins of social choice theory lie at least 450 years before Pliny's analysis. Having developed Plato's idea of mixed government, [Aristotle 350 BC, 340 BC] suggested to implement a combination of oligarchy and democracy by means of weighted voting — the techniques practiced later either explicitly, as in joint-stock companies, or implicitly, as in systems with unequal districting, in the Borda count and some other applications. As for its theory, weighted voting attracted systematic academic attention only in the second half of the 20th century; for references see [Brams 2008, Nurmi 2002, Wikipedia contributors 2026].

Aristotle's introduction of weighted voting is also noteworthy in light of his academic style, which included references to the mathematical issues known in his times — arithmetic and geometric proportions. As Plato's disciple, Aristotle was much influenced by his ideas on the importance of mathematics for scientific rigor, which are particularly prominent in *The Republic* [Plato 360 BC]. In *Nicomachean Ethics* (350 BC) as well as in *Politics* (340 BC), Aristotle operates with mathematical formulas expressed in words that can easily be transformed into symbolic notation.

Thus, Aristotle's contribution to the origins of social choice not only predates the Pliny's one by 450 years, but can also be considered more relevant to the modern theory due to its mathematical generality and rigour, in contrast to Pliny's case study with commonsense reasoning. Since Aristotle's heritage has been closely studied for centuries, some medieval scholars like Llull and Cusanus could be inspired, even unconsciously, by his focus on formalizing election procedures. Finally, the fact that the origins of the social choice theory go back to one of the most influential thinkers of all time enhances its scientific and historical significance.

In Section 2, 'Philosophical background of Aristotle's political studies', Plato's political views are outlined.

In Section 3, 'Aristotle's theory of mixed governance', we describe Aristotle's development of Plato's later ideas.

In Section 4, 'Aristotle's understanding of social justice and equality', we clarify the ambiguities in Aristotle's understanding of equality.

In Section 5, 'Aristotle's mathematical model of oligarchy', we translate Aristotle's textual

¹[Russell 1945, The history of Western philosophy, Ch. XIX].

explanations into mathematical notation.

In Section 6, ‘Aristotle’s mathematical model of mixed governance’, a united decision making formula is derived from Aristotle’s comments.

In Section 7, ‘Conclusion’, Aristotle’s social choice proposals for social choice are put into modern context.

Section 8, ‘Annex: Selected chapters from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*’, includes the full texts of the chapters cited in this article.

2 Philosophical background of Aristotle’s political studies

Aristotle’s teacher and tutor, Plato (427 BC– 347 BC),² was a staunch opponent of democracy. He found that giving powers to a majority that is predominated by mediocrity and led by incompetent parvenus is socially harmful. He illustrated his viewpoint with an allegory of a disabled naval captain with an unskillful crew struggling for the helm:

Conceive this sort of thing happening either on many ships or on one: Picture a shipmaster in height and strength surpassing all others on the ship, but who is slightly deaf and of similarly impaired vision, and whose knowledge of navigation is on a par with his sight and hearing. Conceive the sailors to be wrangling with one another for control of the helm, each claiming that it is his right to steer though he has never learned the art and cannot point out his teacher or any time when he studied it. And what is more, they affirm that it cannot be taught at all, but they are ready to make mincemeat of anyone who says that it can be taught, and meanwhile they are always clustered about the shipmaster importuning him and sticking at nothing to induce him to turn over the helm to them. And sometimes, if they fail and others get his ear, they put the others to death or cast them out from the ship, and then, after binding and stupefying the worthy shipmaster with mandragora or intoxication or otherwise, they take command of the ship, consume its stores and, drinking and feasting, make such a voyage of it as is to be expected from such, and as if that were not enough, they praise and celebrate as a navigator, a pilot, a master of shipcraft, the man who is most cunning to lend a hand in persuading or constraining the shipmaster to let them rule, while the man who lacks this craft they censure as useless. They have no suspicions that the true pilot must give his attention to the time of the year, the seasons, the sky, the winds, the stars, and all that pertains to his art if he is to be a true ruler of a ship, and that he does not believe that there is any art or science of seizing the helm with or without the consent of others, or any possibility of mastering this alleged art1 and the practice of it at the same time with the science of navigation.

488b

488c

488d

488e

[Plato 360 BC, *Republic*, Book VI, iv, pp. 19–22 (488a–e)]

The captain, the decision maker for the fleet or the ship, is an analogy for the ignorant *demos*, and the sailors are the politicians competing for a position at the helm [Bramann 2009].

²Plato’s influence on the Western thought can be hardly overestimated. As noted by [Whitehead 1929, Part II, Ch 1, Sec 1], ‘The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato’.

According to Plato, the problem is not only that common people are not qualified to run the ship of state but they are not even inclined to acquire the necessary skills. Their trust in adventurous politicians make them victims of ill-conceived reforms, unnecessary wars, and unfair judgments. All of these bring the state to economic failures, military defeats, and moral leprosy which otherwise could have been avoided.

Plato suggested that the masses should be governed by educated professionals who can direct them not only practically but also ethically. He has shaped this position in an allegory of educating a beast (the masses), where merely understanding the beast's responses is useless if the educator does not actually instruct the 'great brute' by explaining 'this honorable and that dishonorable, or good or evil, or just or unjust':

It is as if a man were acquiring the knowledge of the humors and desires of a great strong beast which he had in his keeping, how it is to be approached and touched, and when and by what things it is made most savage or gentle, yes, and the several sounds it is wont to utter on the occasion of each, and again what sounds uttered by another make it tame or fierce, and after mastering this knowledge by living with the creature and by lapse of time should call it wisdom, and should construct thereof a system and art and turn to the teaching of it, knowing nothing in reality about which of these opinions and desires is honorable or base, good or evil, just or unjust, but should apply all these terms to the judgements of the great beast, calling the things that pleased it good, and the things that vexed it bad, having no other account to render of them, but should call what is necessary just and honorable, never having observed how great is the real difference between the necessary and the good, and being incapable of explaining it to another.

493b

[Plato 360 BC, *Republic*, Book VI, vii, pp. 39–41 (493a–c)]

493c

The alternative to democracy, as proposed by Plato, is a society steered by philosopher-kings. Plato believed 'that "the good life", for both individuals and collectivities, is an objective phenomenon: it exists independently of the diverse states of being at any given moment and could be grasped through systematic study' [Held 2006, p. 26]. However, the way from ignorance to knowledge is as difficult as in Plato's allegory of escaping from the cave [Plato 360 BC, *Republic*, Book 7, 514a–517a]; for detailed comments on this allegory see [Bramann 2009].

According to Plato, since people are not equal in their ability to learn, an enlightened elite is unavoidable, but equality is an obstacle to its power. Therefore, Plato sees no reason for unconditional equality under democracy, ironically pointing the inconsistency of considering all equal regardless of whether they are equal or not:

These and qualities akin to these democracy would exhibit, and it would, it seems, be a delightful form of government, anarchic and motley, assigning a kind of equality indiscriminately to equals and unequals alike.

[Plato 360 BC, *Republic*, Book VIII, xi, p. 291 (558c)]

Plato's negative attitude toward democracy as expressed in *Republic* was however moderated in his later works *Statesman* [Plato 355 BC] and *Laws* [Plato 350 BC]. By the end of his life Plato had come to the conclusion that a government cannot be stable without some form of popular consent and participation. He started to shape the theory of a mixed state, combining philosopher-kings with democracy [Held 2006, p. 26]. These ideas were not presented systematically by Plato but were developed by his disciple Aristotle.

3 Aristotle's theory of mixed governance

Aristotle created his own theory of mixed governance, deliberately uniting elements of oligarchy and democracy in different combinations:

[Pol. 4. vii. 2] And there are three principles determining this combination or mixture. Under one plan we must adopt both features from the legislative schemes of the two different constitutions: for example, in regard to the administration of justice, in oligarchies they institute a fine for the rich if they do not serve on juries but no pay for the poor for serving, while in democracies they assign pay for the poor but no fine for the rich, but a common and intermediate principle is to have both payment and fine, and therefore this is a mark of a constitutional government, since it is a mixture of elements from both oligarchy and democracy. This then is one mode of combining the two. [Pol. 4. vii. 3] Another is to take the middle course between the regulations of each: for example, democracies permit membership of the assembly on no property-qualification at all or a quite small one, oligarchies on a large property-qualification, but the combination clearly is to have neither principle, but one which lies in the middle between either of these two qualifications. In the third place is a combination of the two systems, taking some features from the oligarchical law and some from the democratic; I mean, for example, that it is thought to be democratic for the offices to be assigned by lot, for them to be elected oligarchic, and democratic for them not to have a property-qualification, oligarchic to have one; therefore it is aristocratic and constitutional to take one feature from one form and the other from the other, from oligarchy that offices are to be elected, and from democracy that this is not to be on a property-qualification. This then is the mode of the mixture; [Pol. 4. vii. 4] and the mark of a good mixture of democracy and oligarchy is when it is possible to speak of the same constitution as a democracy and as an oligarchy; for manifestly this is so when it is said because they have been mixed well, and this is the case with the form that lies in the middle, for each of the two extreme forms can be seen in it.

1294b

[Aristotle 340 BC, *Politics*, Book 4, vii, pp. 321–323 (1294a.36–1294b.19)]

As emphasized by Aristotle, a mixed constitution is more than just a coexistence of democratic and oligarchical elements but an inseparable fusion of them:

[Pol. 4. vii. 6] But in a well-constructed mixed constitution both of the two factors, and neither of them, should seem to be present, and it should be kept safe by its own means and not by outside aid, and by its own means not because those who desire its security are more numerous outside it (for even a bad constitution might possess this quality), but because no section of the state whatever would even wish for another constitution.

[Aristotle 340 BC, *Politics*, Book 4, vii, p. 323 (1294b, 35–40)]

Remarks on the mixed governance are scattered all over *Politics*; for comments see [Manin 1997, pp. 27–28].

4 Aristotle's understanding of social justice and equality

Aristotle derives his arguments from the idea of justice as applied to the understanding of equality, which depends on certain factors:³

[Pol. 3. vii. 1] And inasmuch as in all the sciences and arts the End is a good, and the greatest good and good in the highest degree in the most authoritative of all, which is the political faculty, and the good in the political field, that is, the general advantage, is justice, it is therefore thought by all men that justice is some sort of equality, and up to a certain point at all events they agree with the philosophical discourses in which conclusions have been reached about questions of ethics; for justice is a quality of a thing in relation to persons, and they hold that for persons that are equal the thing must be equal. But equality in what characteristics does this mean, and inequality in what? This must be made clear, since this too raises a difficulty, and calls for political philosophy.

[Aristotle 340 BC, *Politics*, Book 3, vii, p. 231 (1282b.18–23)]

Following Plato's view that different citizens have different merits, Aristotle understands social justice as the proportionality of individual 'shares' (in various areas: office position, remuneration, political influence, etc.) to the merits of individuals. He refers to two types of equality known to Athenians,

$$\text{Arithmetical equality: } x_i = C \text{ for all } i, \quad (1)$$

$$\text{Geometrical (proportional) equality: } x_i = m_i \text{ for all } i. \quad (2)$$

These two types of equality are applied to 'shares' (of power) x_i of individuals i that are either equal ($= C$) in democracy, or proportional to merits (wealth) m_i in oligarchy. According to Aristotle, the more general and therefore true definition of justice is described by the geometric equality, because the arithmetical equality is a particular case of geometrical equality with all coefficients $m_i = 1$. Democracy is thereby a particular case of oligarchy when the only important merit is 'free birth' (in Aristotle's terminology, 'free birth' and 'freedom' mean Athenian citizenship) and others are ignored. Thus, the democratic justice and the oligarchical justice differ in the type of proportion, with which the individual opinions are taken into account:

[Nic.Eth. 5. iii. 3] If then the unjust is the unequal, the just is the equal—a view that commends itself to all without proof; and since the equal is a mean, the just will be a sort of mean too. [Nic.Eth. 5. iii. 4] Again, equality involves two terms at least. It accordingly follows not only (a) that the just is a mean and equal [and relative to something and just for certain persons⁴], but also (b) that, as a mean, it implies certain extremes between which it lies, namely the more and the less; (c) that, as equal, it implies two shares that are equal; and (d) that, as just, it implies certain persons for whom it is just. [Nic.Eth. 5. iii. 5] It follows therefore that justice involves at least four terms, namely, two persons for whom it is just and two shares which are just. [Nic.Eth. 5. iii. 6] And there will be the same equality between the shares as between the persons, since the ratio between the shares will be equal to the ratio between the persons; for if the persons are not equal, they will

³Aristotle discusses justice in his *Nicomachean Ethics*; for selected chapters see Section 8.

⁴These words appear to be an interpolation.

not have equal shares; it is when equals possess or are allotted unequal shares, or persons not equal equal shares, that quarrels and complaints arise.

[Nic.Eth. 5. iii. 7] This is also clear from the principle of ‘assignment by desert’. All are agreed that justice in distributions must be based on desert of some sort, although they do not all mean the same sort of desert; democrats make the criterion free birth; those of oligarchical sympathies wealth, or in other cases birth; upholders of aristocracy make it virtue. [Nic.Eth. 5. iii. 8] Justice is therefore a sort of proportion.

[Aristotle 350 BC, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 5, iii, p. 269 (1131a.12–30)]

5 Aristotle’s mathematical model of oligarchy

Aristotle illustrates the compatibility of democracy and oligarchy, as well as the possibility of their ‘fusion’ in arbitrary proportions, using a mathematical model described in text form. As for oligarchy, Aristotle explicitly suggests to take into account individual merits (wealth) while voting. These merits should be taken into account as ‘shares’ exactly in the same way as shares are taken into account today in joint-stock companies: the opinion supported by a larger total share is the decisive one. In the case of a tie vote (weighted), the social decision can be made by sortition:

[Pol. 6. i. 12] ...For they say that whatever seems good to the majority of the citizens ought to be sovereign. [Pol. 6. i. 13] Let us then accept this principle, yet not wholly without qualification, but inasmuch as fortune has brought into existence two component parts of the state, rich and poor, let any resolution passed by both classes, or by a majority of each, be sovereign, but if the two classes carry opposite resolutions, let the decision of the majority, in the sense of the group whose total property assessment is the larger, prevail: for instance, if there are ten rich citizens and twenty poor ones, and opposite votes have been cast by six of the rich on one side and by fifteen of the less wealthy on the other, four of the rich have sided with the poor and five of the poor with the rich; then the side that has the larger total property when the assessments of both classes on either side are added together carries the voting.⁵ [Pol. 6. i. 14] But if the totals fall out exactly equal, this is to be deemed an *impasse* common to both sides, as it is at present if the assembly or law-court is exactly divided; either a decision must be made by casting lots or some other such device must be adopted. But on questions of equality and justice, even though it is very difficult to discover the truth about them, nevertheless it is easier to hit upon it than to persuade people that have the power to get an advantage to agree to it ; equality and justice are always sought by the weaker party, but those

1318b

⁵The translator, Harris Rackham, provides here the following numerical example:

If the rich citizens are on the average twice as wealthy as the poor ([Pol. 6. i. 11]), and therefore a rich man has two votes to a poor man’s one, when 6 rich and 5 poor vote one way, and 15 poor and 4 rich the other, the division is 17 to 23, and the view of the latter party, which is carried, represents a larger total of wealth but a larger proportion of poor men.

[Aristotle 340 BC, *Politics*, Book 6, i. 13, footnote, p. 496–497 (1318b)]

that have the upper hand pay no attention to them.

[Aristotle 340 BC, *Politics*, Book 6, i, p. 495–497 (1318a.27–1318b.6)]

All of these mean that one has to measure the total merit (wealth) of protagonists and that of antagonists

$$\sum_{\text{Protagonists } i} m_i \stackrel{?}{>} \sum_{\text{Antagonists } j} m_j \quad (3)$$

and the opinion of the group with the larger total merit should be accepted as decisive. Since the wealth estimates m_i, m_j are unequal, the oligarchy is associated with the weighted majority rule.

As already mentioned, Aristotle views democracy as a special case of oligarchy, where all citizens have equal merits $m_i = 1$. Hence, the ‘oligarchical’ rule (3) turns into the usual (unweighted) majority rule:

$$\sum_{\text{Protagonists } i} 1 \stackrel{?}{>} \sum_{\text{Antagonists } j} 1 \quad (4)$$

6 Aristotle’s mathematical model of mixed governance

The next step is mixing democratic and oligarchical elements. In the following quote Aristotle says that ‘justice in its entirety’ should be based on accounting individual merits from the viewpoint of both democracy and oligarchy. From the democratic viewpoint all are equal as Athenian citizens (and then have equal power shares), but unequal from the oligarchical viewpoint as having different wealth m_i (and then unequal power shares m_i):

[Pol. 3. v. 7] ... few men are rich but all men possess freedom, and wealth and freedom are the grounds on which the two classes lay claim to the government.

1280a.4

[Pol. 3. v. 8] And first we must ascertain what are stated to be the determining qualities of oligarchy and democracy, and what is the principle of justice under the one form of government and under the other. For all men lay hold on justice of some sort, but they only advance to a certain point, and do not express the principle of absolute justice in its entirety. For instance, it is thought that justice is equality, and so it is, though not for everybody but only for those who are equals; and it is thought that inequality is just, for so indeed it is, though not for everybody, but for those who are unequal; but these partisans strip away the qualification of the persons concerned, and judge badly. And the cause of this is that they are themselves concerned in the decision, and perhaps most men are bad judges when their own interests are in question. [Pol. 3. v. 9] Hence inasmuch as ‘just’ means just for certain persons, and it is divided in the same way in relation to the things to be distributed and the persons that receive them, as has been said before in the Ethics,⁶ the two parties agree as to what constitutes equality in the thing, but dispute as to what constitutes equality in the person, chiefly for the reason just now stated, because men are bad judges where they themselves are concerned, but also, inasmuch as both parties put forward a plea that is just up to a certain point, they think that what they say is absolutely just. For the one side think that if they are unequal in

⁶Cf. Nicomachean Ethics, Book 5, iii.3–6, (1131a.14–24)

some respects, for instance in wealth, they are entirely unequal, and the other side think that if they are equal in some respects, for instance in freedom, they are entirely equal. [Pol. 3. v. 10] But the most important thing they do not mention. If men formed the community and came together for the sake of wealth, their share in the state is proportionate to their share in the property, so that the argument of the champions of oligarchy would appear to be valid — namely that in a partnership with a capital of 100 minae⁷ it would not be just for the man who contributed one mina to have a share whether of the principal or of the profits accruing equal to the share of the man who supplied the whole of the remainder.

[Aristotle 340 BC, *Politics*, Book 3, v, pp. 211–213 (1280a.4–32)]

Following Aristotle's argument, social decisions should be based on comparing 'justice in its entirety', combining contributions of both democracy and oligarchy:

[Pol. 4. vii. 1] Next to what has been said let us state the way in which what is called constitutional government comes into existence by the side of democracy and oligarchy, and how it is proper to establish it. At the same time the defining characteristics of democracy and oligarchy will also be clear; for we must grasp the distinction between these and then make a combination out of them, taking, so to say, a contribution from each.

[Aristotle 340 BC, *Politics*, Book 4, vii, p. 319 (1294a.30–35)]

Aristotle repeatedly argues that political decision making should reflect both democratic claims grounded in number and oligarchic claims grounded in wealth. Using the mathematical notation (3)–(4) we come to the combined democratic-oligarchical total merit of protagonists and that of antagonists

$$\sum_{\text{Protagonists } i} \left(\underbrace{C}_{\substack{\text{Equal} \\ \text{'democratic'}}} + \underbrace{m_i}_{\substack{\text{Unequal} \\ \text{'oligarchical'}}} \right) \stackrel{?}{>} \sum_{\text{Antagonists } j} \left(\underbrace{C}_{\substack{\text{Equal} \\ \text{'democratic'}}} + \underbrace{m_j}_{\substack{\text{Unequal} \\ \text{'oligarchical'}}} \right),$$

$\begin{array}{ll} \text{power} & \text{power} \\ \text{shares} & \text{shares of} \\ \text{of citizens} & \text{citizens'} \\ & \text{wealth} \end{array} \qquad \qquad \begin{array}{ll} \text{power} & \text{power} \\ \text{shares} & \text{shares of} \\ \text{of citizens} & \text{citizens'} \\ & \text{wealth} \end{array}$

with accepting the opinion of the group with more shares. Note that the unit of wealth used to express m_i and the magnitude of the constant C define the proportion between democratic and oligarchical constituents. In fact, what we have here is simply a weighted sum of democratic and oligarchical criteria, each being a weighted sum of merits: with equal weights for the democratic criterion, and unequal weights for the oligarchical criterion. In other words, we are dealing with a weighted sum of majority rule and weighted majority rule.

7 Conclusion

The Aristotelian approach has been repeatedly rediscovered, rethought, generalized and applied. Examples include voting in joint-stock companies, multi-criteria decision-making models and

⁷Mina, ancient Greek money unit = 43.5 kg of silver = 100 drachmas.

aggregation of indicators expressed in different units of measurement, to name just a few, but their discussion is beyond the scope of this article. We would simply like to emphasize that the idea of weighted summation is entirely rational and mathematically rigorous, and its early appearance makes it particularly surprising and admirable.

Thus, social choice theory can be proud of its origins, which go back to the fundamental works of such a great thinker and scientist as Aristotle. This in no way diminishes the contribution of the Roman politician Pliny the Younger, who until recently was considered the very first precursor of social choice scholars. However, it must be acknowledged that Pliny's personal letter analyzing a specific case could not have the same impact and does not have the same significance for the history of science as Aristotle's books, which, moreover, date back 450 years earlier.

8 Annex: Selected chapters from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics and Politics*

The Aristotle's excerpts in this paper are taken from [Aristotle 350 BC, Aristotle 340 BC]. They are reproduced with subtitles in the margins and footnotes from the translator, British philologist Harris Rackham (1868–1944), as well as with the so-called Bekker numbers, explained in [Knowadays 2024] as follows:

Due to the importance of Aristotle's work, moreover, it has its own numbering system. This is based on the page numbers used in an edition of the complete works of Aristotle edited by the German philologist August Immanuel Bekker (1785–1871), who gave his name to these 'Bekker numbers'.

Also known as 'Bekker pagination', all modern editions of Aristotle's works intended for scholarly use feature this numbering. This ensures consistency across different versions, meaning that readers do not need the same edition as the author to check references.

As such, Bekker numbers have become the standard way to cite Aristotle in academic writing.

Similarly, Plato's *Republic* (360 BC) is cited using Stephanus numbers [Proofed 2019].

8.1 Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (350 BC), Book 5, Chapter iii

[Nic.Eth. 5. iii. 1] Now since an unjust man is one who is unfair, and the unjust is the unequal, it is clear that corresponding to the unequal there is a mean, namely that which is equal; [Nic.Eth. 5. iii. 2] for every action admitting of more and less admits of the equal also. [Nic.Eth. 5. iii. 3] If then the unjust is the unequal, the just is the equal—a view that commends itself to all without proof; and since the equal is a mean, the just will be a sort of mean too. [Nic.Eth. 5. iii. 4] Again, equality involves two terms at least. It accordingly follows not only (a) that the just is a mean and equal [and relative to something and just for certain persons⁸], but also (b) that, as a mean, it implies certain extremes between which it lies, namely the more and the less; (c) that, as equal, it implies two shares that are equal; and (d) that, as just, it implies certain persons for whom it is just. [Nic.Eth. 5. iii. 5] It follows therefore that justice involves at least four terms, namely, two persons for whom it is just and two shares which are just. [Nic.Eth. 5. iii. 6] And there will be the same equality between the shares as between the persons, since the ratio between the shares will be equal to the ratio between the persons; for if the persons are not equal, they will not have equal shares; it is when equals possess or are allotted unequal shares, or persons not equal equal shares, that quarrels and complaints arise.

Distributive Justice.

[Nic.Eth. 5. iii. 7] This is also clear from the principle of 'assignment by desert'. All are agreed that justice in distributions must be based on desert of some sort, although they do not all mean the same sort of desert; democrats make the criterion free birth; those of oligarchical sympathies wealth, or in other cases birth; upholders of aristocracy make it virtue. [Nic.Eth. 5. iii. 8] Justice is therefore a sort of proportion; for proportion is not a property of numerical quantity only, but of quantity in general, proportion being equality of ratios, and involving four terms at least.

⁸These words appear to be an interpolation.

[Nic.Eth. 5. iii. 9] (That a discrete proportion⁹ has four terms is plain, but so also has a continuous proportion, since it treats one term as two, and repeats it: for example,¹⁰ as the line representing term one is to the line representing term two, so is the line representing term two to the line representing term three; here the line representing term two is mentioned twice, so that if it be counted twice, there will be four proportionals.)

1131b

[Nic.Eth. 5. iii. 10] Thus the just also involves four terms at least, and the ratio between the first pair of terms is the same as that between the second pair. For the two lines representing the persons and shares are similarly divided;¹¹ [Nic.Eth. 5. iii. 11] then, as the first term is to the second, so is the third to the fourth; and hence, by alternation, as the first is to the third, so is the second to the fourth; and therefore also, as the first is to the second, so is the sum of the first and third to the sum of the second and fourth. Now this is the combination effected by a distribution of shares, and the combination is a just one, if persons and shares are added together in this way. [Nic.Eth. 5. iii. 12] The principle of Distributive Justice, therefore, is the conjunction of the first term of a proportion with the third and of the second with the fourth; and the just in this sense is a mean between two extremes that are disproportionate,¹² since the proportionate is a mean, and the just is the proportionate.

[Nic.Eth. 5. iii. 13] (This kind of proportion is termed by mathematicians geometrical proportion;¹³ for a geometrical proportion is one in which the sum of the first and third terms will bear the same ratio to the sum of the second and fourth as one term of either pair bears to the other term. — [Nic.Eth. 5. iii. 14] Distributive justice is not a continuous proportion, for its second and third terms, a person and a share, do not constitute a single term.)

The just in this sense is therefore the proportionate, and the unjust is that which violates proportion. The unjust may therefore be either too much or too little; and this is what we find in fact, for when injustice is done, the doer has too much and the sufferer too little of the good in question; [Nic.Eth. 5. iii. 15] though vice versa in the case of an evil, because a lesser evil in comparison with a greater counts as a good, [Nic.Eth. 5. iii. 16] since the lesser of two evils is more desirable than the greater, but what is desirable is good, and the more desirable it is, the greater good it is.

[Nic.Eth. 5. iii. 17] This then is one kind of Justice.

8.2 Aristotle's *Politics* (340 BC), Book 3, Chapter v

1279a

[Pol. 3. v. 1] But inasmuch as 'constitution' means the same as 'government', and the government is the supreme power in the state, and this must be either a single ruler or a few or the mass of the citizens, in cases when the one or the few or the many govern with an eye to the common interest, these constitutions must necessarily be right ones, while those administered with an eye to the private interest of either the one or the few or the multitude are deviations. For either

Constitutions classified by the number of the sovereign body, and by its selfish or unselfish aim.

⁹A 'discrete proportion' means one in which the two ratios are disconnected, being between different terms, whereas in a 'continuous proportion' they have one term in common.

¹⁰Here the lecturer displayed a diagram.

¹¹Here was another diagram (one would expect the sentence to run 'Let two lines representing ... have been similarly divided'). Two segments, A and B, of one line represented two persons, two segments, C and D, of another their shares. It is shown that, if $A : B :: C : D$, then $A + C : B + D :: A : B$, i.e., if the shares are proportioned to the persons, their relative condition after receiving them will be the same as it was before.

¹²i.e., A's just share lies between too large a share and too small a one, too large and too small here meaning more or less than is proportionate to A's claim. Cf. Bk. 2.6.4, third note, and 6.7.

¹³We call this a proportion simply: cf. 4.3 and note.

we must not say that those who are part of the state are citizens, or those who are part of the state must share in the advantage of membership. [Pol. 3. v. 2] Our customary designation for a monarchy that aims at the common advantage is ‘kingship’; for a government of more than one yet only a few ‘aristocracy’ (either because the best men rule or because they rule with a view to what is best for the state and for its members); while when the multitude govern the state with a view to the common advantage, it is called by the name common to all the forms of constitution, ‘constitutional government’. [Pol. 3. v. 3] (And this comes about reasonably, since although it is possible for one man or a few to excel in virtue, when the number is larger it becomes difficult for them to possess perfect excellence in respect of every form of virtue, but they can best excel in military valor, for this is found with numbers; and therefore with this form of constitution the class that fights for the state in war is the most powerful, and it is those who possess arms who are admitted to the government.) [Pol. 3. v. 4] Deviations from the constitutions mentioned are tyranny corresponding to kingship, oligarchy to aristocracy, and democracy to constitutional government; for tyranny is monarchy ruling in the interest of the monarch, oligarchy government in the interest of the rich, democracy government in the interest of the poor, and none of these forms governs with regard to the profit of the community.

1279b

But it is necessary to say at a little greater length what each of these constitutions is; for the question involves certain difficulties, and it is the special mark of one who studies any subject philosophically, and not solely with regard to its practical aspect, that he does not overlook or omit any point, but brings to light the truth about each. [Pol. 3. v. 5] Now tyranny, as has been said, is monarchy exerting despotic power over the political community; oligarchy is when the control of the government is in the hands of those that own the properties; democracy is when on the contrary it is in the hands of those that do not possess much property, but are poor. A first difficulty is with regard to the definition. If the majority of the citizens were wealthy and were in control of the state, yet when the multitude is in power it is a democracy, and similarly, to take the other case, if it were to occur somewhere that the poor were fewer than the rich but were stronger than they and accordingly were in control of the government, yet where a small number is in control it is said to be an oligarchy, then it would seem that our definition of the forms of constitution was not a good one.¹⁴ [Pol. 3. v. 6] And once again, if one assumed the combination of small numbers with wealth and of multitude with poverty, and named the constitutions thus—one in which the rich being few in number hold the offices, oligarchy: one in which the poor being many in number hold the offices, democracy,—this involves another difficulty. What names are we to give to the constitutions just described—the one in which there are more rich and the one in which the poor are the fewer, and these control their respective governments—if there exists no other form of constitution beside those mentioned? [Pol. 3. v. 7] The argument therefore seems to make it clear that for few or many to have power is an accidental feature of oligarchies in the one case and democracies in the other, due to the fact that the rich are few and the poor are many everywhere (so that it is not really the case that the points mentioned constitute a specific difference), but that the real thing in which democracy and oligarchy differ from each other is poverty and wealth; and it necessarily follows that wherever the rulers owe their power to wealth, whether they be a minority or a majority, this is an oligarchy, and when the poor rule, it is a democracy, although it does accidentally happen, as we said, that where the rulers hold power by wealth they are few and where they hold power by poverty they are many, because few men are rich but all men possess freedom,

Oligarchy
and
Democ-
racy
essen-
tially the
govern-
ments of
the rich
and poor,
not of the
few and
many.

1280a

¹⁴i.e. it would be absurd to term government by the people democracy if the people happened to be very rich, or government by a few oligarchy if the few were poor and the many whom they governed rich.

and wealth and freedom are the grounds on which the two classes lay claim to the government.

[Pol. 3. v. 8] And first we must ascertain what are stated to be the determining qualities of oligarchy and democracy, and what is the principle of justice under the one form of government and under the other. For all men lay hold on justice of some sort, but they only advance to a certain point, and do not express the principle of absolute justice in its entirety. For instance, it is thought that justice is equality, and so it is, though not for everybody but only for those who are equals; and it is thought that inequality is just, for so indeed it is, though not for everybody, but for those who are unequal; but these partisans strip away the qualification of the persons concerned, and judge badly. And the cause of this is that they are themselves concerned in the decision, and perhaps most men are bad judges when their own interests are in question. [Pol. 3. v. 9] Hence inasmuch as 'just' means just for certain persons, and it is divided in the same way in relation to the things to be distributed and the persons that receive them, as has been said before in the Ethics,¹⁵ the two parties agree as to what constitutes equality in the thing, but dispute as to what constitutes equality in the person, chiefly for the reason just now stated, because men are bad judges where they themselves are concerned, but also, inasmuch as both parties put forward a plea that is just up to a certain point, they think that what they say is absolutely just. For the one side think that if they are unequal in some respects, for instance in wealth, they are entirely unequal, and the other side think that if they are equal in some respects, for instance in freedom, they are entirely equal. [Pol. 3. v. 10] But the most important thing they do not mention. If men formed the community and came together for the sake of wealth, their share in the state is proportionate to their share in the property, so that the argument of the champions of oligarchy would appear to be valid—namely that in a partnership with a capital of 100 minae¹⁶ it would not be just for the man who contributed one mina to have a share whether of the principal or of the profits accruing equal to the share of the man who supplied the whole of the remainder; but if on the other hand the state was formed not for the sake of life only but rather for the good life (for otherwise a collection of slaves or of lower animals would be a state, but as it is, it is not a state, because slaves¹⁷ and animals have no share in well-being or in purposive life), and if its object is not military alliance for defence against injury by anybody, and it does not exist for the sake of trade and of business relations¹⁸—for if so, Etruscans and Carthaginians and all the people that have commercial relations with one another would be virtually citizens of a single state; [Pol. 3. v. 11] at all events they have agreements about imports and covenants as to abstaining from dishonesty and treaties of alliance for mutual defence; but they do not have officials common to them all appointed to enforce these covenants, but different officials with either party, nor yet does either party take any concern as to the proper moral character of the other, nor attempt to secure that nobody in the states under the covenant shall be dishonest or in any way immoral, but only that they shall not commit any wrong against each other. All those on the other hand who are concerned about good government do take civic virtue and vice into their purview. Thus it is also clear that any state that is truly so called and is not a state merely in name must pay attention to virtue; for otherwise the community becomes merely an alliance, differing only in locality from the other alliances, those of allies that live apart. And the law is a covenant or, in the phrase of the sophist Lycophron,¹⁹ a guarantee of

The distribution of power. Justice is not the equality of the unequal:

for the State exists for the sake of the good life,

1280b

not merely for protection and intercourse

¹⁵Cf. Aristot. Nic. Eth. 1131a 14–24.

¹⁶See 1268b 14 n.

¹⁷See 1260a 12, and Aristot. Nic. Eth. 1177a 8, 'but no one allows a slave any measure of happiness, any more than a life of his own'.

¹⁸The sentence here breaks off; The inference that should have formed its conclusion is given in 5.15.

¹⁹Probably a pupil of Gorgias, see 1275b 26 n.

men's just claims on one another, but it is not designed to make the citizens virtuous and just. [Pol. 3. v. 12] And that this is how the matter stands is manifest. For if one were actually to bring the sites of two cities together into one, so that the city-walls of Megara and those of Corinth were contiguous, even so they would not be one city; nor would they if they enacted rights of intermarriage with each other, although intermarriage between citizens is one of the elements of community which are characteristic of states. And similarly even if certain people lived in separate places yet not so far apart as not to have intercourse, but had laws to prevent their wronging one another in their interchange of products—for instance, if one man were a carpenter, another a farmer, another a shoemaker and another something else of the kind,—and the whole population numbered ten thousand, but nevertheless they had no mutual dealings in anything else except such things as exchange of commodities and military alliance, even then this would still not be a state. [Pol. 3. v. 13] What then exactly is the reason for this? for clearly it is not because their intercourse is from a distance since even if they came together for intercourse of this sort (each nevertheless using his individual house as a city) and for one another's military aid against wrongful aggressors only, as under a defensive alliance, not even then would they seem to those who consider the matter carefully to constitute a state, if they associated on the same footing when they came together as they did when they were apart. It is manifest therefore that a state is not merely the sharing of a common locality for the purpose of preventing mutual injury and exchanging goods. These are necessary preconditions of a state's existence, yet nevertheless, even if all these conditions are present, that does not therefore make a state, but a state is a partnership of families and of clans in living well, and its object is a full and independent life. [Pol. 3. v. 14] At the same time this will not be realized unless the partners do inhabit one and the same locality and practise intermarriage; this indeed is the reason why family relationships have arisen throughout the states, and brotherhoods and clubs for sacrificial rites and social recreations. But such organization is produced by the feeling of friendship, for friendship is the motive of social life; therefore, while the object of a state is the good life, these things are means to that end. And a state is the partnership of clans and villages in a full and independent life, which in our view constitutes a happy and noble life; the political fellowship must therefore be deemed to exist for the sake of noble actions, not merely for living in common. [Pol. 3. v. 15] Hence those who contribute most to such fellowship have a larger part in the state than those who are their equals or superiors in freedom and birth but not their equals in civic virtue, or than those who surpass them in wealth but are surpassed by them in virtue. It is therefore clear from what has been said that all those who dispute about the forms of constitution assert a part of the just principle.

1281a
Therefore,
the absolute right
to power is
ability to
contribute to
the good life.

8.3 Aristotle's *Politics* (340 BC), Book 3, Chapter vii

[Pol. 3. vii. 1]²⁰ And inasmuch as in all the sciences and arts the End is a good, and the greatest good and good in the highest degree in the most authoritative of all, which is the political faculty, and the good in the political field, that is, the general advantage, is justice, it is therefore thought by all men that justice is some sort of equality, and up to a certain point at all events they agree with the philosophical discourses in which conclusions have been reached about questions of ethics,²¹ for justice is a quality of a thing in relation to persons,²² and they hold

Claims
to power
are birth,
wealth,
freedom,
and above
all virtue;

²⁰What follows is a summary of Aristot. Nic. Eth. I. cc. i., ii.

²¹See also Aristot. Nic. Eth. 5.3.

²²Literally, 'the just is (a just) something and (something just) for somebody'.

that for persons that are equal the thing must be equal. But equality in what characteristics does this mean, and inequality in what? This must be made clear, since this too raises a difficulty, and calls for political philosophy. [Pol. 3. vii. 2] For perhaps someone might say that the offices of state ought to be distributed unequally according to superiority in every good quality, even if the candidates in all other respects did not differ at all but were exactly alike, because men that are different²³ have different rights and merits. Yet if this is true, those who are superior in complexion or stature or any good quality will have an advantage in respect of political rights. But surely the error here is obvious, and it comes out clearly if we consider the other sciences and faculties. Among flute-players equally good at their art it is not proper to give an advantage in respect of the flutes to those of better birth, for they will not play any better, but it is the superior performers who ought to be given the superior instruments. [Pol. 3. vii. 3] And if our meaning is not yet plain, it will become still clearer when we have carried the matter further. Suppose someone is superior in playing the flute but much inferior in birth or in good looks, then, even granting that each of these things birth and beauty—is a greater good than ability to play the flute, and even though they surpass flute-playing proportionately more than the best flute-player surpasses the others in flute-playing, even so the best flute-player ought to be given the outstandingly good flutes; for otherwise superiority both in wealth and in birth ought to contribute to the excellence of the performance, but they do not do so at all. [Pol. 3. vii. 4] Moreover on this theory every good thing would be commensurable with every other. For if to be of some particular height gave more claim, then height in general would be in competition with wealth and with free birth; therefore if A excels in height more than B does in virtue, and speaking generally size gives more superiority than virtue,²⁴ all things would be commensurable for; if such-and-such an amount of one thing is better than such-and-such an amount of another, it is clear that such-and-such an amount of the one is equal to that amount of another. [Pol. 3. vii. 5] But since this is impossible, it is clear that in politics with good reason men do not claim a right to office on the ground of inequality of every kind—if one set of men are slow runners and another fast, this is no good ground for the one set having more and the other less²⁵ political power, but the latter's superiority receives its honor in athletic contests; but the claim to office must necessarily be based on superiority in those things which go to the making of the state. Hence it is reasonable for the well-born, free and wealthy to lay claim to honor; for there must be free men and tax-payers, since a state consisting entirely of poor men would not be a state, any more than one consisting of slaves. [Pol. 3. vii. 6] But then, granting there is need of these, it is clear that there is also need of justice and civic virtue, for these are also indispensable in the administration of a state; except that wealth and freedom are indispensable for a state's existence, whereas justice and civic virtue are indispensable for its good administration.

1283a

As a means therefore towards a state's existence all or at all events some of these factors would seem to make a good claim, although as means to a good life education and virtue would make the most just claim, as has been said also before. [Pol. 3. vii. 7] On the other hand since those who are equal in one thing only ought not to have equality in all things nor those unequal as regards one thing inequality in all, it follows that all these forms of constitution must be deviations. Now it has been said before that all make a claim that is in a manner just, though not all a claim that is absolutely just; the rich claiming because they have a larger share of the

for education and virtue from the good life, c.v. §15

c.v. §§8 ff.

²³i.e. different in some good quality.

²⁴Perhaps we should rewrite the Greek to give 'even though speaking generally virtue gives more superiority than size'.

²⁵Doubtless the author meant the other way round, 'for the slow having less and the fast more political power'.

land, and the land is common property, and also as being for the most part more faithful to their covenants; the free and well-born as being closely connected together (for the better-born are citizens to a greater degree than those of claims, low birth, and good birth is in every community held in honor at home), and also because it is probable that the children of better parents will be better, for good birth means goodness of breed; [Pol. 3. vii. 8] and we shall admit that virtue also makes an equally just claim, for we hold that justice is social virtue, which necessarily brings all the other virtues in its train; but moreover the majority have a just claim as compared with the minority, since they are stronger and richer and better if their superior numbers are taken in comparison with the others' inferior numbers. Therefore supposing all were in one city, I mean, that is, the good and the wealthy and noble and also an additional mass of citizens, will there be a dispute, or will there not, as to who ought to govern? [Pol. 3. vii. 9] It is true that under each of the forms of constitution that have been mentioned the decision as to who ought to govern is undisputed (for the difference between them lies in their sovereign classes—one is distinguished by being governed by the rich men, one by being governed by the good men, and similarly each of the others); but nevertheless we are considering the question how we are to decide between these classes supposing that they all exist in the state at the same period.

[Pol. 3. vii. 10] If then the possessors of virtue should be quite few in number, how is the decision to be made? ought we to consider their fewness in relation to the task, and whether they are able to administer the state, or sufficiently numerous to constitute a state? And there is some difficulty as regards all the rival claimants to political honors. Those who claim to rule because of their wealth might seem to have no justice in their proposal, and similarly also those who claim on the score of birth; for it is clear that if, to go a step further, a single individual is richer than all the others together, according to the same principle of justice it will obviously be right for this one man to rule over all, and similarly the man of outstanding nobility among the claimants on the score of free birth. [Pol. 3. vii. 11] And this same thing will perhaps result in the case of aristocratic government based on virtue; for if there be some one man who is better than the other virtuous men in the state, by the same principle of justice that man must be sovereign. Accordingly if it is actually proper for the multitude to be sovereign because they are better than the few, then also, if one person or if more than one but fewer than the many are better than the rest, it would be proper for these rather than the multitude to be sovereign. [Pol. 3. vii. 12] All these considerations therefore seem to prove the incorrectness of all of the standards on which men claim that they themselves shall govern and everybody else be governed by them. For surely even against those who claim to be sovereign over the government on account of virtue, and similarly against those who claim on account of wealth, the multitudes might be able to advance a just plea; for it is quite possible that at some time the multitude may be collectively better and richer than the few, although not individually.

[Pol. 3. vii. 13] Hence it is also possible to meet in this way the question which some persons investigate and put forward (for some raise the question whether the legislator desiring to lay down the rightest laws should legislate with a view to the advantage of the better people or that of the larger number) in cases when the situation mentioned²⁶ occurs. And 'right' must be taken in the sense of 'equally right', and this means right in regard to the interest of the whole state and in regard to the common welfare of the citizens; and a citizen is in general one who shares in governing and being governed, although he is different according to each form of constitution, but in relation to the best form a citizen is one who has the capacity and the will to be governed and to govern with a view to the life in accordance with virtue.

but wealth,
birth,
numbers
also have
relative
claims,
and
hustify
aristoc-
racy and
republican
govern-
ment
1283b

Difficulties:
the end is
the good
of the
commu-
nity.
not of the
few or the
many.

1284a

²⁶ At the end of the last sentence, 7.12.

8.4 Aristotle's *Politics* (340 BC), Book 4, Chapter vii

[Pol. 4. vii. 1] Next to what has been said let us state the way in which what is called constitutional government comes into existence by the side of democracy and oligarchy, and how it is proper to establish it. At the same time the defining characteristics of democracy and oligarchy will also be clear; for we must grasp the distinction between these and then make a combination out of them, taking, so to say, a contribution from each. [Pol. 4. vii. 2] And there are three principles determining this combination or mixture. Under one plan we must adopt both features from the legislative schemes of the two different constitutions: for example, in regard to the administration of justice, in oligarchies they institute a fine for the rich if they do not serve on juries but no pay for the poor for serving, while in democracies they assign pay for the poor but no fine for the rich, but a common and intermediate principle is to have both payment and fine, and therefore this is a mark of a constitutional government, since it is a mixture of elements from both oligarchy and democracy. [Pol. 4. vii. 3] This then is one mode of combining the two. Another is to take the middle course between the regulations of each: for example, democracies permit membership of the assembly on no property-qualification at all or a quite small one, oligarchies on a large property-qualification, but the combination clearly is to have neither principle, but one which lies in the middle between either of these two qualifications. In the third place is a combination of the two systems, taking some features from the oligarchical law and some from the democratic; I mean, for example, that it is thought to be democratic for the offices to be assigned by lot, for them to be elected oligarchic, and democratic for them not to have a property-qualification, oligarchic to have one; therefore it is aristocratic and constitutional to take one feature from one form and the other from the other, from oligarchy that offices are to be elected, and from democracy that this is not to be on a property-qualification. This then is the mode of the mixture; [Pol. 4. vii. 4] and the mark of a good mixture of democracy and oligarchy is when it is possible to speak of the same constitution as a democracy and as an oligarchy; for manifestly this is so when it is said because they have been mixed well, and this is the case with the form that lies in the middle, for each of the two extreme forms can be seen in it. [Pol. 4. vii. 5] This is the case with the constitution of Sparta. For many people endeavor to describe it as being a democracy, because its system has many democratic features, for instance first of all its regulation for the rearing of boys, since the sons of the rich are brought up in the same way as those of the poor, and are educated in a manner in which the sons of the poor also could be educated, and they are also treated similarly at the next age, and in the same manner when they are grown up, for there is nothing that distinguishes the rich man from the poor man thus the arrangements for food are the same for all at the common messes, and the rich wear clothes such as even any poor man could procure, and also because of the two greatest offices the common people elect to one and share in the other (they elect the Elders and share in the Ephorate); but others call it an oligarchy, because it has many oligarchical features, for instance that all the offices are elective and none appointed by lot and few persons have the power to sentence to death and exile, and a number of other such matters. [Pol. 4. vii. 6] But in a well-constructed mixed constitution both of the two factors, and neither of them,²⁷ should seem to be present, and it should be kept safe by its own means and not by outside aid, and by its own means not because those who desire its security are more numerous outside it²⁸ (for even a bad constitution might possess this quality), but because no section of the state whatever

1294b
Three forms of this blend.

Three forms of this blend.

²⁷ A conjectural emendation removes this mysterious epigram, giving 'and not one of the two (only)'.

²⁸ Or, if ἐξωθεῖν is an interpolation, 'not merely because those (citizens) who wish it to survive are more numerous (than those who do not)'.

would even wish for another constitution.

The proper way therefore to establish a constitutional government, and similarly also the governments named aristocracies, has now been stated.

8.5 Aristotle's *Politics* (340 BC), Book 6, Chapter i

[Pol. 6. i. 1] We have already discussed²⁹ how many and what are the varieties of the deliberative body or sovereign power in the state, and of the system of magistracies and of law-courts, and which variety is adapted to which form of constitution, and also³⁰ the destruction of constitutions and their preservation, from what sort of people they originate and what are their causes. But as a matter of fact since there have come into existence several kinds of democracy and similarly of the other forms of constitution, it will be well at the same time to consider³¹ any point that remains about these varieties, and also determine the mode of organization appropriate and advantageous for each. [Pol. 6. i. 2] And further we must also investigate³² the combinations of all the modes of organizing the actual departments of state that have been mentioned,³³ for these modes when coupled together make the constitutions overlap, so as to produce oligarchical aristocracies and republics inclining towards democracy. I refer to the combinations which ought to be investigated but have not at present been studied, for example if the deliberative body and the system of electing magistrates are organized oligarchically but the regulations as to the law-courts aristocratically, or these and the structure of the deliberative body oligarchically and the election of magistracy aristocratically, or if in some other manner not all the parts of the constitution are appropriately combined.

[Pol. 6. i. 3] Now it has been stated before³⁴ what kind of democracy is suited to what kind of state, and similarly which of the kinds of oligarchy is suited to what kind of populace, and also which of the remaining constitutions is advantageous for which people; but nevertheless since it must not only be made clear which variety of these constitutions is best for states, but also how both these best varieties and the other forms must be established, let us briefly pursue the subject. And first let us speak about democracy; for at the same time the facts will also become clear about the opposite form of constitution, that is, the constitution which some people call oligarchy.³⁵

[Pol. 6. i. 4] And for this inquiry we must take into view all the features that are popular and that are thought to go with democracies; for it comes about from combinations of these that the kinds of democracy are formed, and that there are different democracies and more than one sort. In fact there are two causes for there being several kinds of democracy, first the one stated before, the fact that the populations are different (for we find one multitude engaged in agriculture and another consisting of handicraftsmen and day-laborers, and when the first of these is added to the second and again the third to both of them it not only makes a difference in that the quality of the democracy becomes better or worse but also by its becoming different in kind); [Pol. 6. i. 5] and the second cause is the one about which we now speak. For the institutions

Book VI.
Democ-
racy and
Oligarchy
(cc. i.-iv.).

1316b

1317a

Varieties
of democ-
racy:

due to va-
rieties of
population

and of
consti-
tutional
structure.

²⁹Book 4, 1297b 35 ff.

³⁰Book 5.

³¹1318b-1319a 6.

³²These topics do not occur in the extant work.

³³i.e. the deliberative, executive and judicial, see 1297b 41 ff.

³⁴1296b 13-1297a 13.

³⁵'Rule of the few', i.e. the few rich, but the name is not exact, for in aristocracy also the rulers are few.

that go with democracies and seem to be appropriate to this form of constitution make the democracies different by their combinations; for one form of democracy will be accompanied by fewer, another by more, and another by all of them. And it is serviceable to ascertain each of them both for the purpose of instituting whichever of these kinds of democracy one happens to wish and for the purpose of amending existing ones. For people setting up constitutions seek to collect together all the features appropriate to their fundamental principle, but in so doing they make a mistake, as has been said before in the passage dealing with the causes of the destruction and the preservation of constitutions. And now let us state the postulates, the ethical characters and the aims of the various forms of democracy.

[Pol. 6. i. 6] Now a fundamental principle of the democratic form of constitution is liberty—that is what is usually asserted, implying that only under this constitution do men participate in liberty, for they assert this as the aim of every democracy. But one factor of liberty is to govern and be governed in turn; for the popular principle of justice is to have equality according to number, not worth, and if this is the principle of justice prevailing, the multitude must of necessity be sovereign and the decision of the majority must be final and must constitute justice, for they say that each of the citizens ought to have an equal share; so that it results that in democracies the poor are more powerful than the rich, because there are more of them and whatever is decided by the majority is sovereign. [Pol. 6. i. 7] This then is one mark of liberty which all democrats set down as a principle of the constitution. And one is for a man to live as he likes; for they say that this is the function of liberty, inasmuch as to live not as one likes is the life of a man that is a slave. This is the second principle of democracy, and from it has come the claim not to be governed, preferably not by anybody, or failing that, to govern and be governed in turns; and this is the way in which the second principle contributes to equalitarian liberty.³⁶ [Pol. 6. i. 8] And these principles having been laid down and this being the nature of democratic government, the following institutions are democratic in character: election of officials by all from all; government of each by all, and of all by each in turn; election by lot either to all magistracies or to all that do not need experience and skill; no property-qualification for office, or only a very low one; no office to be held twice, or more than a few times, by the same person, or few offices except the military ones; short tenure either of all offices or of as many as possible; judicial functions to be exercised by all citizens, that is by persons selected from all, and on all matters, or on most and the greatest and most important, for instance the audit of official accounts, constitutional questions, private contracts; the assembly to be sovereign over all matters, but no official over any or only over extremely few; or else a council to be sovereign over the most important matters [Pol. 6. i. 9] (and a council is the most democratic of magistracies in states where there is not a plentiful supply of pay for everybody—for where there is, they deprive even this office of its power, since the people draws all the trials to itself when it has plenty of pay, as has been said before in the treatise preceding this one³⁷); also payment for public duties, preferably in all branches, assembly, law-courts, magistracies, or if not, for the magistracies, the law-courts, council and sovereign assemblies, or for those magistracies which are bound³⁸ to have common mess tables. Also inasmuch as oligarchy is defined by birth, wealth and education, the popular qualifications are thought to be the opposite of these, low birth, poverty, vulgarity. And in respect of the magistracies it is democratic to have none tenable for life, and if any life-office has been left after an ancient revolution, at all events to deprive it of its power and to substitute election by lot for election by vote.

Democracy is based on liberty to govern in turn and to live as you like.

1317b

Characteristics and details of democracy

1318a

³⁶This clause is obscure: perhaps it is an interpolation.

³⁷Book 4, 1299b 38 ff. (Books 4. and 5. are regarded as forming one treatise).

³⁸i.e. owing to the nature of their duties, and by general custom.

[Pol. 6. i. 10] These then are the features common to democracies. But what is thought to be the extreme form of democracy and of popular government comes about as a result of the principle of justice that is admitted to be democratic, and this is for all to have equality according to number. For it is equality for the poor to have no larger share of power than the rich, and not for the poor alone to be supreme but for all to govern equally; for in this way they would feel that the constitution possessed both equality and liberty. [Pol. 6. i. 11] But the question follows, how will they have equality? are the property-assessments of five hundred citizens to be divided among a thousand and the thousand to have equal power to the five hundred?³⁹ or is equality on this principle⁴⁰ not to be arranged in this manner, but the division into classes to be on this system, but then an equal number to be taken from the five hundred and from the thousand and these to control the elections and the law-courts? Is this then the justest form of constitution in accordance with popular justice, or is it rather one that goes by counting heads?⁴¹ For democrats say that justice is whatever seems good to the larger number, but advocates of oligarchy think that it is whatever seems good to the owners of the larger amount of property, for they say that the decision ought to go by amount of property. [Pol. 6. i. 12] But both views involve inequality and injustice; for if the will of the few is to prevail, this means a tyranny, since if one man owns more than the other rich men,⁴² according to the oligarchic principle of justice it is just for him to rule alone; whereas if the will of the numerical majority is to prevail, they will do injustice by confiscating the property of the rich minority, as has been said before.⁴³ What form of equality therefore would be one on which both parties will agree must be considered in the light of the principles of justice as defined by both sets. For they say that whatever seems good to the majority of the citizens ought to be sovereign. [Pol. 6. i. 13] Let us then accept this principle, yet not wholly without qualification, but inasmuch as fortune has brought into existence two component parts of the state, rich and poor, let any resolution passed by both classes, or by a majority of each, be sovereign, but if the two classes carry opposite resolutions, let the decision of the majority, in the sense of the group whose total property assessment is the larger, prevail: for instance, if there are ten rich citizens and twenty poor ones, and opposite votes have been cast by six of the rich on one side and by fifteen of the less wealthy on the other, four of the rich have sided with the poor and five of the poor with the rich; then the side that has the larger total property when the assessments of both classes on either side are added together carries the voting.⁴⁴ [Pol. 6. i. 14] But if the totals fall out exactly equal, this is to be deemed an *impasse* common to both sides, as it is at present if the assembly or law-court is exactly divided; either a decision must be made by casting lots or some other such device must be adopted. But on questions of equality and justice, even though it is very difficult to discover the truth about them, nevertheless it is easier to hit upon it than to persuade people that have the power to get an advantage to agree to it; equality and justice are always sought by the weaker party, but those that have the upper hand pay no attention to them.

Equality according to number and to wealth.

The claim of wealth.

1318b

³⁹i.e. two groups of voters, with equal total wealth and total voting-power, but one group twice as numerous as the other, so that a man in the rich group has two votes and one in the poor group one, the former being on the average twice as rich as the latter.

⁴⁰i.e. ‘equality in proportion to number’.

⁴¹i.e. ‘one man one vote’.

⁴²i.e. apparently, more than the property of all the others put together.

⁴³1281a 14.

⁴⁴If the rich citizens are on the average twice as wealthy as the poor ([i. 11]), and therefore a rich man has two votes to a poor man’s one, when 6 rich and 5 poor vote one way, and 15 poor and 4 rich the other, the division is 17 to 23, and the view of the latter party, which is carried, represents a larger total of wealth but a larger proportion of poor men.

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