

CHAPTER
5

Section 3

PRIMARY SOURCE *from Politics*
by Aristotle

The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) spent 20 years at Plato’s Academy. He eventually started his own school and tutored Alexander until his royal student became the king of Macedonia. Aristotle wrote influential books on many different topics, including biology, rhetoric, poetry, and politics. As you read this passage from Book IV of Aristotle’s Politics, think about how he uses logic to arrive at definitions of two principal forms of government that existed in ancient Greece.

One should not regard democracy, in the way some are now accustomed to do, as being simply where the multitude is in control (for, in fact, both in oligarchies and everywhere else, the greater part is in control), nor should one regard oligarchy as being where few have control over the regime. For if the whole number were 1,300, and 1,000 of these were rich but gave no share in rule to the 300 who, though free and similar in other respects, were poor, no one would say that they were running a democracy. Likewise too, if the poor were few but stronger than the well-off, who were more numerous, no one would call such a regime an oligarchy if the others, though wealthy, had no share in the honors. It should, then, rather be said that popular rule is when the free are in control and oligarchy is when the rich are; but it happens that the first are many and the second few, since many are free and few are rich. For otherwise there would be an oligarchy if offices were distributed according to size, as some say is the case in Ethiopia, or according to beauty, because the beautiful and the tall are few in number.

Yet it is not even enough to distinguish these regimes by these criteria alone. Rather, since there are several parts to the populace and to oligarchy, it is necessary to grasp further that neither would there be popular rule if the free who were few were ruling over those who were a majority and not

free (as, for example, in Apollonia on the Ionian Gulf and in Thera, for in each of these cities the honors belonged to those who, though few among many, were superior in good birth and had got first possession of the colonies), nor would there be popular rule if the rich were superior in numbers (as, for example, in Colophon long ago, for there the majority had acquired much substance before the war against the Lydians). But it is democracy when the free and needy who are the majority have control of rule, and it is oligarchy when the rich and better born who are few have control.

from The Politics of Aristotle, Peter L. Phillips Simpson, trans. (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press: 1997), 175–176.

Discussion Questions

1. **Summarizing** Greek city-states adopted several different forms of government—monarchy, aristocracy, oligarchy, and direct democracy. Which two forms does Aristotle discuss in this passage?
2. **Clarifying** What two criteria did Aristotle use to describe the difference between these two forms of government?
3. **Drawing Conclusions** Which definition best describes the form of government that exists in the United States today? Explain your answer.