

△ The Acropolis in ancient Athens. (The Bettmann Archive.)

A More Perfect Union

World Studies

Aristotle: In Search of the Best Constitution

“He who commands that law should rule may thus be regarded as commanding God and reason alone should rule; he who commands that a man should rule adds the character of the beast.”

— from Aristotle’s *Politics*

When George Washington, James Madison and the other framers of the Constitution assembled at Philadelphia in the summer of 1787, they soon decided, without much discussion, to abandon their original task of revising the Articles of Confederation. Instead, they set about creating a new system of government.

Since the delegates to the Philadelphia convention represented so many different interests, this would prove no easy task. There were Northerners and Southerners. There were men from big states and small. Some

came from farming areas while others represented cities where manufacturing or trade dominated.

Despite their many differences, the delegates did have at least one thing in common: they were educated men. They had carefully studied history and great political philosophers such as Locke and Montesquieu. Through that long, hot summer in Philadelphia, great ideas from the past would inspire the delegates in shaping the future of the United States.

One of the political philosophers who influenced the framers was an ancient Greek, Aristotle. He lived, taught and wrote more than 2,000 years earlier. The writings of Aristotle helped guide the Philadelphia delegates in writing the new American Constitution.

Student, Teacher, Scientist

Born in 384 B.C., Aristotle came from a middle-class family. At age 17, he entered the Academy at Athens, a noted Greek school headed at the time by the famous philosopher Plato. Here Aristotle studied mathematics, astronomy, medicine, biology, ethics and the law. He remained at the Academy, as Plato’s best student, for 20 years.

In 342 B.C., Philip of Macedonia invited Aristotle to tutor his 13-year-old son Alexander. Aristotle served as Alexander’s teacher for seven years. When Alexander became king of

Macedonia in 336 B.C., Aristotle returned to Athens to begin the most productive stage of his life.

At age 49, Aristotle established his own philosophy school called the Lyceum in Athens. Here he studied, catalogued, lectured, debated and wrote about every area of knowledge known in the ancient world.

Aristotle and Politics

One of Aristotle’s many interests was government. He studied how people in all times and places known to him were ruled. Toward the end of his years at the Lyceum, Aristotle lectured and wrote a number of essays on government. Taken together, these essays make up a book that today we know as Aristotle’s *Politics*.

In Aristotle’s time, Greece was not a unified nation. It consisted of many independent city-states, each with its own form of government. Most of the city-states were small, only 100 square miles or less with populations rarely exceeding 10,000.

The term “constitution” had a different meaning to Aristotle than it does to us today. The constitutions Aristotle envisioned were not single, organized documents like the one created at Philadelphia in 1787. Ancient Greek constitutions consisted of all the customs, rules and laws about how a city-state

should be governed. These customs, rules and laws were sometimes written, but often not. Still, everyone understood what they were. Aristotle wrote that a constitution "is the way of life of a citizen-body." According to Aristotle, citizens were "all who share in the civic life of ruling and being ruled in turn." Citizenship in the city-states was a status granted only to certain groups, depending on the form of government. In some, only the rich were full citizens. In others, all free-born men enjoyed full citizenship. Children, women and slaves were not considered citizens.

"Right" and "Wrong" Constitutions

Aristotle identified six different kinds of constitutions, and he classified them as either "right" or "wrong." According to Aristotle, "right" constitutions served the common interests of all citizens. "Wrong" constitutions served only the selfish interests of a certain person or group. On the chart below, the "wrong" constitutions are shown as corrupted forms of the "right" constitutions:

	"Right" (Common Interest)	"Wrong" (Personal Interest)
one	Kingship	Tyranny
few	Aristocracy	Oligarchy
many	Polity	Democracy

Kingship, the first "right" constitution identified by Aristotle, is rule by a single man who becomes a ruler through heredity or election. Aristotle thought kings have the advantage of acting quickly and decisively in emergencies. Still, kings are subject to emotions and cannot handle all necessary matters at once. For these reasons, Aristotle argued, kings should not possess absolute power. They should be limited by the law. When kings rule, Aristotle says in *Politics*, "they should be made 'law guardians' or ministers of the law."

What happens when a king uses his power to benefit only himself and not the common interest? In this case a king becomes a tyrant. *Tyranny*, the corrupt form of kingship, is the first example of a "wrong" constitution. Tyrants use force to oppress all others and are interested only in their own personal gain.

Aristotle classified *aristocracy* as one of his "right" constitutions. Aristocracies are societies governed by a small group of men chosen because they

are the "best." In Aristotle's view, aristocrats are men of wealth and leisure who have developed their minds so that they have superior intellects. Aristotle believed that these men would only rule for the benefit of all. But when an aristocracy rules for the benefit of the rich, it becomes an *oligarchy*, another one of Aristotle's "wrong" constitutions. Oligarchies were one of the common forms of government found in the Greek city-states.

During his lifetime in Athens, Aristotle lectured and wrote on politics at his school. Even though Athens was a democratic city-state, Aristotle was never a fan of democracy and he included it as one of his "wrong" constitutions. Aristotle believed *democracy* meant that every free-born man had the right and *duty* to help rule the city. Thus, both rich and poor, educated and ignorant, intelligent and dull-witted could attend the Assembly meetings, vote and hold public office.

Aristotle saw danger in this form of government. The poor majority would always be able to outvote the wealthy and the best. The poor could ruin a state by overtaxing the rich and confiscating their property. In other words, a democracy could easily become a tyranny with many heads.

Aristotle also feared the rise of demagogues in a democracy. Demagogues are power-seekers who gained influence by appealing to the emotions of the people.

Even with his reservations, Aristotle was not totally against democracy. "There is this to be said for the Many," he wrote in *Politics*. "Each of them by himself may not be of a good quality; but when they all come together it is possible that they may surpass...the quality of the few best."

The Best Constitution

Aristotle found things to criticize about all the "right" and "wrong" constitutions discussed above. So what did he decide was the best constitution?

He decided on a balanced one based on the Greek principle that the extremes in life should be avoided in favor of the moderate middle. One should neither eat too much nor too little. One should neither exercise excessively nor spend most of the time sleeping. As in life, so with government, Aristotle believed.

Aristotle concluded that mixing two extreme "wrong" constitutions, oligarchy and democracy, would result in a moderate "right" one. In this case,

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△ Aristotle instructing his pupil, Alexander. (The Bettmann Archive.)

two "wrongs" would make a "right." Aristotle called this moderate mixed constitution a *polity* and believed that it would best serve the common interest of all citizens in most states.

At Philadelphia some 2,000 years after Aristotle's time, a group of men were also searching for the best constitution. America was in many ways quite different from Aristotle's Greece. For one thing, the 13 American states were a lot bigger than Athens or any of the other ancient Greek city-states. Still, the framers at Philadelphia understood Aristotle's political ideas and passed them on to us in the document they created. Among these ideas are the belief in the rule of law, moderation and a government that serves the common interest of all citizens. □



For Discussion and Writing

1. Contrast democracy in ancient Athens with democracy in the United States today.
2. The world has changed a great deal since Aristotle's time. Are there still forms of government similar to the ones he described? Tyranny? Oligarchy? Demagogues?

3. What do each of the following quotations from Aristotle's *Politics* mean?

- a. "Where the laws are not sovereign, there is no constitution."
- b. "The best way of life is one which consists in the mean."
- c. "The good in the sphere of politics is justice; and justice consists in what tends to promote the common interest."



A C T I V I T Y

Two Countries

Meet in small discussion groups to do this activity.

Imagine that at some time in the future only two countries exist in the world: Freeland and Leaderland. Since you have nowhere else to go, you *must* choose one of these countries in which to live. Which one would you pick? Why?

Freeland

In this country the people are free to do whatever they want. Children and adults may decide for themselves if they want to go to school, work, sleep all day, play at the beach, watch videos, get

drunk, etc. There are *no* laws of any kind in Freeland.

Leaderland

In this country there are many laws which all have been made by one man: the Leader. The people of this country are told by the Leader and his assistants where to live, how to dress, what jobs to hold, what newspapers to read and whom to vote for at election time. The people lead safe and orderly lives...as long as they follow the Leader.

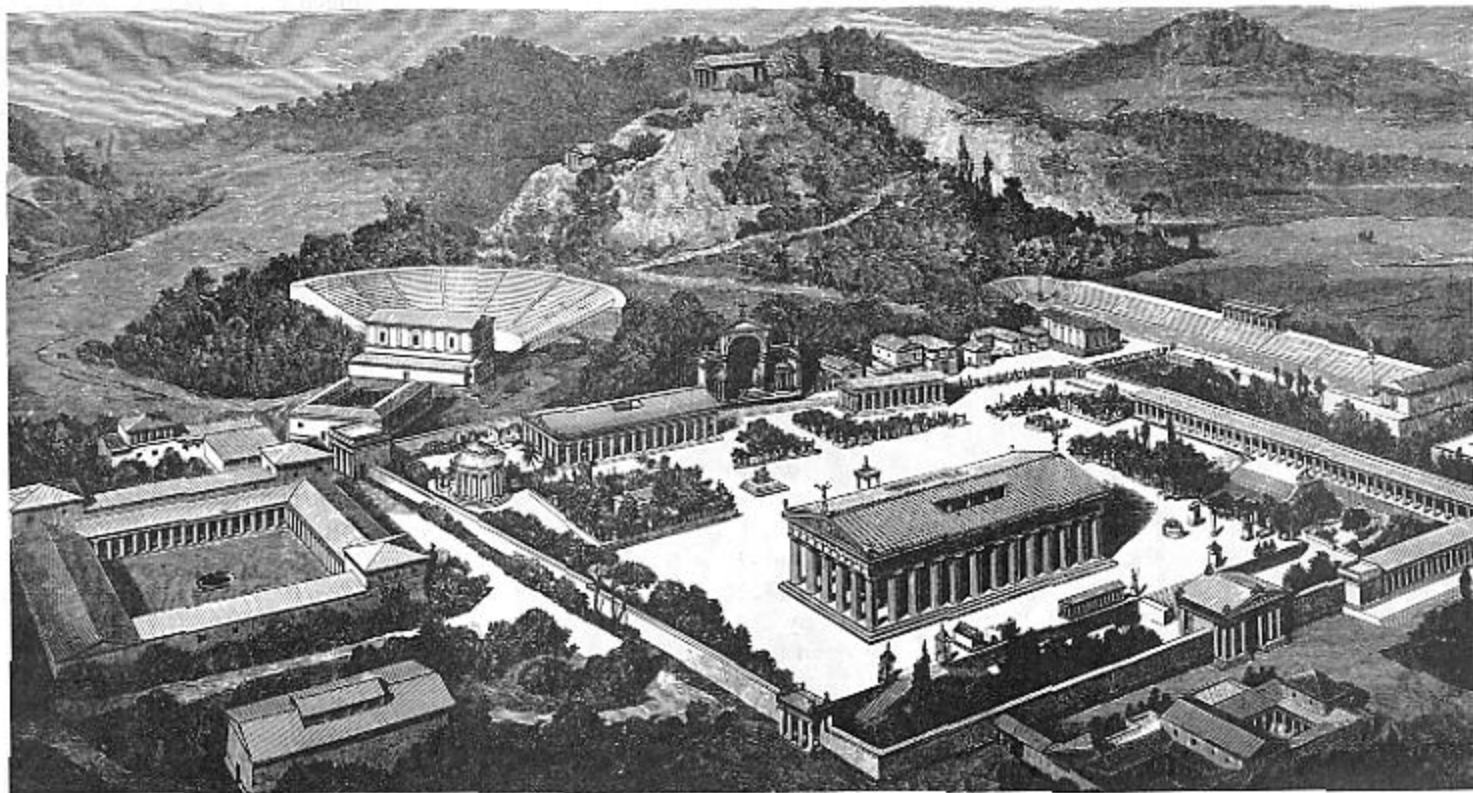
After discussing the choices above in small groups, meet as a class and vote on which country you prefer. Then discuss the following questions:

1. Why did you vote the way you did?
2. If you could go to another land, what would it be like? Should there be any laws? Who should make them?
3. Assume that Aristotle has come back to life and is visiting your classroom. What do you think his opinion of Freeland and Leaderland would be? What choice do you think he would make?

For Further Reading

Barker, Ernest, ed. and trans. *The Politics of Aristotle*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1962.

Hornblower, Simon. *The Greek World*. London: Methuen & Co., 1983.



△ (The Bettmann Archive.)