

**How and why has the view on democratic government changed during
the history of Western political thought?**

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Introduction

An important—if not integral—question in political thought is the question of government: who gets to rule? History provides a plethora of possible solutions to this question, but yet some archetypes of government seem to have more hold than others; monarchies, aristocracies and democracies. A global trend for the past two centuries points toward democracy as the preeminent type—but going further back in history, this was hardly the case, and both the monarchic and aristocratic models have had their time in the limelight. This assignment aims to investigate how the portrayal of democratic government in political thought has changed since the beginnings of the democratic tradition in ancient Greece up until the 19th century—when modern democracies began to spread. By diving into the works of a select few thinkers from different historical contexts, this assignment seeks to compare and analyze how the view of democratic government has evolved and identify which historical factors may have contributed to the change.

This assignment is based on four political thinkers—Aristotle, Hobbes, Montesquieu and Tocqueville—from different eras of political thought (classical Greece, early modern philosophy, Age of Enlightenment and Age of Revolutions, respectively). Analyzed in chronological order, each thinker will be considered by one paragraph on their thoughts and stance on democracy, one paragraph discussing the similarities and differences in their view compared to the previously discussed thinker, and one paragraph concerning the historical context in which they were writing—and how that, along with more personal factors, may have influenced their thought. In the final part of the assignment, two concluding paragraphs will summarize the evolution of democratic thought, assess the strengths and weaknesses of the account provided here, and finally attempt to put the findings into a present-day perspective.

Aristotle

Aristotle's (384 BCE-322 BCE) opinion of democratic government is most evident in his work *Politics*. In the rather chaotically composed work the subject is visited a few times, notably in book 3 and 4 (McClelland, 1996), painting a rather negative picture of his view. Aristotle and his students had conducted an extensive surveying of the political systems of the city-states of ancient Greece, visiting some 158 *poleis*. Aristotle used this empirical data to systemically categorize and furthermore, rank, their constitutions, in his search for the best constitution (McClelland, 1996). He found 6 archetypes of government and grouped these into 2 triads, based on whether the ruler(s) served the common good (which was desirable) or their own interests (corrupt/deviant government). Emphasizing virtuousness of the ruler(s), he found monarchy to have the greatest potential, but also the greatest risk of perversion into tyranny; which he saw as the worst of all governmental forms. He arrived at the best possible constitution being the somewhat dubious *politeia*; a rule by the virtuous many; an adapted version of timocracy (McClelland, 1996).

Democracy was the corrupted version of *politeia*, but of the deviant forms of government, it was the most moderate; and thus "the best of the worst". While critical, he cedes that democracy might not only be acceptable, but in fact preferable when the collective virtue and wisdom (*phronesis*) of inferior men outweigh that of the few virtuous men; yet he finds this rarely be the case (Smith, 2016)(Lintott, 1992). Generally in the oeuvre of Aristotle, *democracy* is the rule by the masses—the poor—ruling in the interest of themselves (McClelland, 1996). Thus, his description and view of democracy corresponds with what would later be referred to as *ochlocracy*—mob rule. Aristotle points to the prevalence of demagogues in contemporary Athens as an inherent flaw in democracy (Lintott, 1992). Furthermore, he cites demagoguery as the reason that the original—and, in his eyes, better—Solonian constitution of Athens, had changed. He concluded that democracy tended to induce tyranny; either by a demagogue rising to monarchical power or simply with the masses themselves becoming the tyrant (Lintott, 1992).

Aristotle's views on democracy may have been influenced by a variety of factors, including Plato's mentorship—who himself was a democracy-skeptic after the execution of Socrates (McClelland, 1996). While the influence of Plato is undoubtedly great, some departures and significant differences can be found between the views presented in Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Politics*. Aristotle's

background may also have played a sizable role in forming his opinion; born in Macedon to a father serving as a personal physician to the king, Aristotle grew up with close ties to the Macedonian court (later even serving as the personal tutor of Alexander the Great)(McClelland, 1996). His Macedonian heritage could be an explanation of both his soft defense of monarchy, but also of his distaste for democracy; as he was not born an Athenian, he lived there as a *metic*—an outsider. He even had to flee the city twice due to growing anti-Macedonian sentiment (McClelland, 1996). A *metic* had no citizen rights and was thus unable to participate in the political undertakings of the city-state (McClelland, 1996). This explains the overvaluation of citizenship prevalent in his writing; and, further, why he sees a specific class of citizenry ruling in his ideal *politeia* (McClelland, 1996).

Hobbes

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) was a hugely influential English philosopher, whose magnum opus, *Leviathan*, is a cornerstone in political thought. His conclusions differing greatly from his contemporaries in the field of *the social contract*, he starts with the same premise; to explain the emergence of states. Hobbes argued that before man formed societies, there existed a *state of nature*, in which life famously was “[...] *solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short*” (Hobbes, 1651, as cited in McClelland, 1996), and to escape this, formed civil societies by entering into a social contract. By signing over their liberty to a Sovereign power—symbolized by the biblical monster *leviathan*—man created a supreme authority to uphold the peace. While critical of Aristotelian thought, Hobbes employed a strikingly similar view of governmental forms, recognizing the triad of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy as the three forms a Sovereign could take (McClelland, 1996). What to Aristotle were deviant forms of government, Hobbes argued were rather variations of the three—only varying in the quality of the Sovereign (Apperley, 1999).

To Hobbes, democracy existed as the stepping stone between the state of nature and civil society; as the hypothetical social contract had to be agreed upon by a majority of people in the case of sovereignty by institution. In the case of sovereignty by acquisition, different as it is, sovereignty was not achieved through the deliberation one might assume in the other case, but Hobbes argued that the process was roughly the same; driven by fear and survival, the people in the conquered lands signed a social contract to attain peace. (McClelland, 1996). Hobbes departed from the Aristotelian view of democracy, arguing that the Sovereign just as well could assume a democratic form; it was thus a legitimate form of government (Smith, 2016). To Hobbes, however, democratic Sovereign possessed

some inherent flaws which a monarchical one did not; importantly in matters of efficiency. The need for a democratic Sovereign to meet and decide on matters was highly inefficient, and since a democratic assembly could not be in session continuously, it would have to appoint an “interim government” in the form of a council or a single person (Apperley, 1999). The rational-egotistic nature of man would over time lead to democracies becoming *de facto* aristocracies or monarchies - leading to Hobbes conclusion that democratic government as innately unstable (Apperley, 1999).

Not unlike Aristotle, Hobbes had ties with both aristocratic and royal families (even tutoring the future King Charles II)—which may have influenced his staunch royalism (McClelland, 1996). However, given the sensibility and logical progress of his argumentation, it would be unfair to suggest that he was unfairly biased towards monarchy. He lived in a time where the strongest and most stable states were absolute monarchies—so it made a lot of sense for him to approve of the concept. Further, Hobbes lived through both the English Civil War and the Thirty Years’ War, witnessing the destruction and chaos he collected was inherent in human nature and prevailed in the absence of a Sovereign power (McClelland, 1996). In regard to his view on democracy; although skeptical of the longevity of democratic regimes, a certain development is present from Aristotelian thought; though not viewing it as ideal, Hobbes was arguably open to the possibility of a democratic government acting as Sovereign.

Montesquieu

Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu (hereafter: Montesquieu) (1689-1755) was a French aristocrat, man-of-letters and thinker. His work *The Spirit of the Laws*, published in 1748 became enormously popular—almost changing his reputation overnight (McClelland, 1996). The extremely well-researched treatise covers a wide range of topics, notably liberty, law and politics. Montesquieu, a man of the Enlightenment, concerned himself with rights and liberty of citizens in different political systems—defining three main kinds of system; republic, monarchy and despotism. In his definition, the republics vary from democratic to aristocratic, depending on their distribution of citizenship and rights (McClelland, 1996). For each of his forms of government, he defines a *principle*; a societal factor which guides the actions of government—without which, the political system could not persist. In monarchy and despotism, the principles were honor and fear, respectively, and in republics it was *virtue*; the willingness to put the common interest ahead of one’s own (McClelland, 1996). To Montesquieu, both monarchy and republic were *moderate* forms of

government, as in both instances the ruling were governing by law, and thus allowed for citizens to enjoy liberty and be virtuous—which despotism did not (Carrese, 2016).

A major theme of *The Spirit of the Laws* is political liberty (Carrese, 2016). Montesquieu argued that the best way to ensure liberty for the citizens was to constitutionalize system of *separated powers*; allowing the branches of government to keep each other in check. This idea later served as great inspiration to the American constitution (McClelland, 1996). Montesquieu thought, much like Aristotle, that involving both democratic, aristocratic and monarchic elements in a mixed government was ideal. Further, he argued that the power be divided into an executive, legislative and a judicial branch, each independent and each kept in check by the others. Important to Montesquieu's view was that the people were the ultimate sovereign—differing greatly from the Hobbesian view, in which people were by definition *under* the Sovereign (McClelland, 1996). Montesquieu attributed the Roman Republic's success in part to its political institutions; the constant checks between the senate, magistrates and tribunes served as a moderating and balancing factor (McClelland, 1996). To Montesquieu, the reason for the Republics eventual failure was its size; and accordingly, he did not see a republic as a realistic form of government in his day; states had simply become too large. Therefore, he concluded that the ideal option was constitutional monarchy (Lund, 2021).

The Age of Enlightenment, in which Montesquieu was writing, brought with it a flourishing of both philosophy and the sciences. In terms of political philosophy, this meant that thinkers were increasingly questioning whether the ubiquitous monarchy, in fact, was the ideal form of government (Love, 2008). The constitutional monarchy for which Montesquieu was arguing is certainly a bit of a jump from the Hobbesian Sovereign; it set strict limits on royal authority. In it, however, is also to be found an inherent defense of the privileges of the aristocracy—the Estates—the caste to which he himself belonged as a nobleman and former *parlementaire*. Questions have been raised regarding the apparent vested interest he had in a strengthening of the French aristocracy and the influence which it may have had on his conclusions (Love, 2008).

Tocqueville

Alexis Charles Henri Clérel, comte de Tocqueville (hereafter: Tocqueville) (1805-1859) was a French aristocrat, diplomat and politician, known for his work *Democracy in America* – published in two volumes in 1835 and 1840. Tocqueville had recognized a trend of increasing equality in society of

the last centuries, which led him to believe that democracy was an unstoppable historical trend—this in spite of France’s decades of turbulence and war, that had come in the wake of the French Revolution, and the return to monarchy (Tocqueville, 2012). While serving as a member of the Chamber of Deputies in the July Monarchy, Tocqueville conducted a nine-month study trip to the United States of America, under the pretense of studying the American penal system. While there, however, he examined and investigated the workings of American society—and the effects which its democratic structure had on the nature of American civil society (Welch, 2017). Like Aristotle had categorized regimes according to their *object* and Montesquieu according to their *spirit*, Tocqueville sought to investigate, define and capture democracy’s “inclinations, character, prejudices and passions” (Tocqueville, 1835, as cited in Welch, 2017).

Influenced by Montesquieu, Tocqueville highlighted the favorable climatic and geographic conditions as a reason for the emergence of democracy in America (Welch, 2017). Tocqueville, not concerned with having to justify democratic government since he saw it as inevitable—rather worked to observe and interpret its effects. In Tocqueville’s eyes, democracy could very easily turn into despotism—for reasons much similar to those presented by Aristotle or Hobbes. He feared the majoritarian nature would turn into a *tyranny of the majority* (Welch, 2017). His fears stem from what would later come to be known as the *Tocqueville effect*; what he perceived as a downward spiral of democratization; with rights follows a desire for more rights—until the passion for equality becomes “ardent, insatiable, eternal, invincible” (Tocqueville, 1840, as cited in Welch, 2017). The extreme equality can lead to despotism in several ways, some much like those Aristotle warned of. Further, he feared it leading to what he called *soft despotism*; a degradation of democratic society to a state of mild, stagnant despotism where society was dominated by a vast, Orwellian network of complicated rules, quietly controlling the people—while giving an illusion of freedom (Welch, 2017). Thus, while overall a believer and defender of democracy, he believed that democracy remain *moderate*—to keep it from turning tyrannical.

Several historical factors may have been key in the formation of Tocqueville’s opinion of democracy. Born into Napoleonic France—his family had narrowly avoiding being executed following the Revolution—it is no wonder that he had doubts and saw the threats demagoguery and mob-rule posed to the stability of democratic government. Tocqueville had however noted the underlying historical trend of democratization in the past several centuries (Wolin, 2003). The July Revolution, which

overthrew the Bourbon Restoration in 1830 in large part led him to his belief that France was moving towards complete social equality (Welch, 2017)—as the subsequent July monarchy had replaced the formerly hereditary rights to office with popular sovereignty. However, along with the increasing equality Tocqueville observed and reasoned was the source of democracy, another aspect of society—hitherto untouched by this assignment—had increased as well, with perhaps just as much influence on the growing appeal of democracy; education. The Enlightenment had brought with it broad public education, which meant that the ignorant masses of the past were no longer as ignorant as before; they now had a reasonable claim to influence (Tröhler et al., 2011).

Conclusion

The view of democratic government has thus changed substantially during history. With Aristotle solely using the term to describe despotic majoritarian regimes, Hobbes was somewhat open to the ideas of a democratic Sovereign. Where Aristotle finds the unity of extreme democracy to be a problem, Hobbes regards it as a rather defining factor in the stability of a regime (Apperley, 1999). However, Hobbes also emphasizes the same flaws in democratic government as Aristotle; the vulnerability to demagoguery; it easily conforms into an “aristocracy of orators, interrupted sometimes with the temporary monarchy of one orator” (Hobbes, as cited in Apperley, 1999). Montesquieu clearly laid out that the form of government that was the most balanced and just in terms of liberty and rights was a republic—but as this was not an option, he instead advocated a mixed government which bears a significant resemblance to that of Aristotle’s *politeia*. Interestingly, the American society which Tocqueville came to judge was in large part based on the doctrines of Montesquieu. Tocqueville, who had deduced an inevitable trend of democratization in history came to present the first serious defense of modern democracy in his *Democracy in America* (Lund, 2021), having deduced from history an inevitable trend of democratization. A clear change is thus to be seen in the portrayal of democracy; with some elements persisting over the millennia. The inherent danger of democracy turned despotism that led to Aristotle’s disapproval of democracy was still ever-present and prevalent in the Tocqueville’s analysis of democratic America.

The account provided here offers only a glimpse into the field of democratic thought—and, as only four thinkers have been chosen, it hardly does it justice. It also carries the weakness of generalization; the thoughts presented, however influential, are taken to show a general development in favor of democracy—but they were hardly the dominant views at the time of their publication, and by picking

different thinkers, an arguably more skeptical account could be shown. It does, however, point to a significant development in the portrayal of democratic government in antiquity and in the 17th, 18th and 19th century. This is a rather narrow perspective though—and democratic thought has continued to evolve since then. Some of the considerations and concerns presented have, however, proved quite true. The rise of fascism in 1930's Europe showed that democratic governments are indeed vulnerable to demagoguery, and that the *tyranny of the majority* is a very real thing in the oppression of minorities (Glassman, 2021). Further, the *Tocqueville effect* refers to the paradoxical but apparent inverse relationship between subjective discontent and objective grounds for discontent (Elster, 2009). In a 21st century context, the effect can be used to explain the apparent “democratic backsliding” and return of populism in present-day Western democracies.

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