Aristotle on Democracy

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Abstract: In recent years, modern democracy has faced significant challenges on a global scale, and the democratic chaos in the United States is particularly prominent. The riots at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, deeply revealed the fragility of democratic institutions, especially in the context of popular mood swings and political radicalization, which tend to deviate from their original purpose. The electoral crisis and social fragmentation in the United States reflect Aristotle's critique of democracy in his Politics: he argued that democracy often leads to the tyranny of the majority and that decisions are dictated by emotional crowds, which can ultimately harm the country's long-term interests[1]. As Tawney (2002) puts it, "In a democracy, the majority, driven by emotion, can make decisions that undermine the common good and the stability of the state "(p. 157).[5] Aristotle's idea of a "mixed polity", combining the advantages of democracy and aristocracy, could avoid such political imbalances and ensure rational governance and political stability. Finley (1973) pointed out that "the mixed constitution, combining the best elements of democracy and aristocracy, can prevent the degradation of political decision-making and contribute to a more stable and just society "(p. 210)[2]. By analyzing Aristotle's criticism of democracy and comparing it with the chaos of modern American democracy, this paper discusses how to improve the contemporary democratic system through the wisdom of ancient political philosophy, and puts forward suggestions for improving the balance between citizen participation and political rationality to enhance the effectiveness of democratic governance.

1. Introduction

Modern democratic systems, particularly those in the United States, face serious political challenges today. These issues include political polarization, partisan divisions, inefficient governance, and widespread public distrust of political institutions. An example of political polarization in the United States is the 2020 election and the Capitol riots that followed. The election results showed a sharp split between the two parties, with Democratic supporters calling the results legitimate while Republican supporters of former President Donald Trump questioned the election's fairness. On January 6, 2021, some supporters of Trump stormed the Capitol building in an attempt to overturn the election result, leading to further polarization of American politics and exposing the deep opposition between the two parties and their supporters on election integrity and the democratic system. (Sunstein, 2017)[4]. This phenomenon exemplifies how social media algorithms and partisan media ecosystems exacerbate divisions, as noted by Sunstein (2017): "Political polarization in the

United States has reached unprecedented levels, driven by social media algorithms and partisan media ecosystems" (p. 45).[4]

Apparently, these phenomena indicate possible defects within democratic systems, especially the potential for short-sightedness and disorder caused by the rule of the majority. However, these were not even new for classical philosophers. Democracy has a history of over 2500 years, and philosophers like Aristotle have already discussed these shortcomings in 350 B.C.E., a long time from today. In this context, revisiting the political ideas of classical philosophers becomes insightful for addressing contemporary concerns. Therefore, among the many famous classical philosophers, I chose Aristotle's view as the subject of my discussion.

Aristotle (384 BC - 322 BC) was a great philosopher as well as a (lesser-known) statesman of ancient Greece, a student of Plato, and a teacher of Alexander the Great. He founded the "Peripatetic School," which profoundly influenced philosophy, ethics, politics, and other fields. Aristotle advocated understanding the real world through observation and experience and put forward the ethical thought of "the mean" and the metaphysical theory of the theory of four causes. His ideas laid the foundation of Western philosophy and science. In his study of political science, particularly, he discussed at length the advantages and disadvantages of democracy as a political system.

This paper explores Aristotle's critical analysis of democracy, focusing on his concerns regarding inefficient governance, factional conflict, and the rise of demagogues. By examining Aristotle's reflections on democratic disorder, this paper argues that his classical insights can provide valuable guidance for contemporary democratic systems, especially by introducing the concept of virtue-based governance to address the weaknesses often inherent in modern democracies. In terms of the structure of this paper, section 2 introduces Aristotle's general view on democracy, including his definition of democracy, his comparison of democracy and other political systems, and others. Section 3 demonstrates Aristotle's criticisms of democracy. Section 4 concludes by drawing insights from Aristotle's solution to solving problems inherent in democratic systems.

2. Aristotle's view on democracy: preliminaries

2.1 Definition of Democracy

As mentioned in Aristotle's book Politics, "the form of government is a democracy when the free, who are also poor and the majority, govern"(P78). By this sentence Aristotle ggives his definition of this political system. To elaborate, he defines democracy as a political system where power is controlled by the free poor, i.e., the majority. Moreover, according to Aristotle, "The basis of a democratic state is liberty; which, according to the common opinion of men, can only be enjoyed in such a state—this they affirm to be the great end of every democracy. One principle of liberty is for all to rule and be ruled in turn, and indeed democratic justice is the application of numerical not proportionate equality; whence it follows that the majority must be supreme, and that whatever the majority approve must be the end and the just." (P.129) Therefore, the core principle of this system is that all citizens have equal participation, equality, and liberty. That also means the system allows more citizens to engage in political decisions.

2.2 Comparison with Other Political systems

In *Politics*, Aristotle first divides political systems into three categories. More specifically, Aristotle identifies six primary types of political systems: kingly rule, aristocracy, and constitutional government, which are ideal forms of government, while democracy, oligarchy, and tyranny are deviations from these ideals. He wrote in his *Politics*, "in our original discussion about governments,

we divide them into three true forms: kingly rule, aristocracy, and constitutional government, and three corresponding perversions—tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy." (P.75). Then, he distinguishes how many people or each social class controlled each political system. According to Aristotle, kingly rule is reigned by one person, aristocracy is ruled by a few people from the upper class and constitutional government is ruled by a group of people from all classes.

Aristotle also points out that he thinks the difference between a good polity and a bad polity was whether it is the rule by virtue. In *Politics*, he mentions many times that virtue exists only in good political systems, not bad ones. For example, on page 156 of *Politics*, he wrote: "A city can be excellent only when the citizens who have a share in the government are excellent, and in our state all the citizens share in the government." (Aristotle, 1984, p. 156) That means only the political system ruled by virtuous individuals or government is called a good political system. This further proves that virtue is one of the main differences between good and bad polity. Another example of virtue's role in political systems appears on page 58, where it says: "Our conclusion, then, is that political society exists for the sake of noble actions, and not of living together.". (Aristotle, 1984, p. 58) The contrast is even clearer in this quote, which indicates that the aim is to cultivate virtue and excellence in a good political, in contrast to bad political systems that prioritize survival or self-interest.

2.3 Core Principles and Criticism of Democracy

Aristotle believes that freedom is the most important core principle of democracy, including two aspects: first, "rule and be ruled in turn", that is, all citizens should participate in governance and accept governance in different periods. The second is to live according to one's own will, which is also the embodiment of individual freedom. In addition, he believes that civic participation is also one of the core principles of democracy, and all citizens have the responsibility to participate in elections, hold public office, and vote in assembly to ensure the realization of common governance. At the same time, Aristotle stresses the importance of the rule of law in a democratic system, arguing that the law should take precedence over the decisions of individuals or assemblies to prevent the democratic system from becoming extreme or unstable under the control of demagogues. This emphasis on law reflects a broader principle of modern constitutional democracies, which inherently balance majority rule with checks on power (Held, 2006)[3].

3. Aristotle's thoughts on democratic disorder

More than two thousand years ago, Aristotle discussed democracy as a political system, and he argued that although democracy has some advantages, it has more problems, so Aristotle classifies it as a bad regime. And the problems he observes then are still present in modern democracy. I will focus on three main issues in the following paragraphs: insufficient governance, Defects of Majority Rule, and Critique of Democratic Equality. I would also provide an example of these problems in real life to help us better correct them.

3.1 Insufficient Governance

Aristotle argues that governance often fails when unsuitable individuals hold key positions in the state. He uses the Ephorate system in Sparta as an example to point out how it was susceptible to corruption and bribery, leading to weakened governance.

A good example that appears today would be Brazil's impeachment of former President Dilma Rousseff; his administration was marred by scandals involving government officials accused of corruption and abuse of power, ultimately leading to her removal. This case illustrates how

insufficient governance can weaken a government's ability to make decisions effectively.

3.2 Defects of Majority Rule

Aristotle criticizes the concept of majority rule in democracies, arguing that decisions are often based on numerical equality rather than proportional justice. In such systems, the majority, usually the poor, often dominate the rich simply because of their numbers, leading to decisions that may not always be just. Majority rule, according to Aristotle, fails to consider the qualitative aspects of governance. As mentioned in the *Politics*: "whence it follows that the majority must be supreme, and that whatever the majority approve must be the end and the just. Every citizen, it is said, must have equality, and therefore, in a democracy, the poor have more power than the rich because there are more of them, and the will of the majority is supreme." (Aristotle, 1984, p. 129)

A notable example is the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom that happened a few years ago. Although the majority voted to leave the European Union, the decision did not account for the strong opposition from minority groups such as young people, ethnic minorities, and regions like Scotland and Northern Ireland. These groups felt that their interests were overlooked, showing how majority rule can lead to unjust outcomes when the views of the minority are ignored.

3.3 Critique of Democratic Equality

Aristotle thinks that the concept of equality in democracies is filled with problems, particularly the idea that everyone should have an equal share in governance, regardless of their qualifications. He makes a distinction between "numerical equality," where everyone counts equally, and "proportional equality," where governance should be based on merit and competence. He argues that the democratic notion of equality, where the majority rules simply because of their numbers, often ignores the competence and wisdom of the minority, leading to flawed governance.

When this shortcoming is connected with today, the example of the U.S. electoral system could stand for it. In the United States electoral system, there is an appearance of equality, but the reality is that "money politics" plays a significant role. Although all citizens theoretically have an equal right to vote and participate in elections, wealthy candidates or those who can raise large sums of money often have a significant advantage. This phenomenon reveals how the formal equality of democratic participation can conceal actual inequalities, where candidates with more resources have disproportionate influence. As a result, candidates with more merit or qualifications might be overlooked in favor of those who are better funded, undermining the principles of just governance.

4. Conclusion: The significance of virtue

In reviewing Aristotle's major critiques of democracy, it is clear that he emphasizes a fundamental concern: democratic governance often prioritizes quantity over quality. This observation highlights the inherent risk of empowering the majority without sufficient regard for the virtues and capabilities required for effective leadership. Aristotle's skepticism regarding the ability of democracies to cultivate wise and just rulers is particularly relevant in contemporary discussions surrounding democratic practices.

Reflecting on the relevance of Aristotle's critiques, we can see manifestations of his concerns in various aspects of modern democracy, particularly in the political polarization and governance challenges faced by the United States. The divisive nature of contemporary political discourse, where populism often supersedes informed debate, echoes Aristotle's warnings about the potential for democracy to devolve into chaos and factionalism. The prioritization of short-term popular approval over long-term governance goals illustrates the very vulnerabilities that Aristotle identified in

democratic systems.

In conclusion, as we seek solutions to the challenges faced by modern democracies, it is essential to consider Aristotle's insights, particularly the need to balance the ideal of equality with the importance of wise and virtuous leadership. Addressing the decline in virtue and public spirit is crucial to revitalizing democratic institutions. By prioritizing ethical leadership and cultivating a political culture grounded in civic responsibility, contemporary democracies can better navigate the complexities of governance and strive toward the common good.

References

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