ARISTOTLE

Background: Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) was a philosopher in Ancient Greece and author of *The Politics* and *The Nicomachean Ethics*. The Founding generation turned to Aristotle for his insights into how different societies might structure their governments. For Aristotle, a government might take one of three forms: a monarchy (government by the one), an aristocracy (government by the few), or a polity (government by the many). Aristotle also emphasized the important role that virtue played in successful governments—with a virtuous government promoting the common good rather than the selfish interests of those in charge.

Excerpt:

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Aristotle, *The Politics*—Book Three*:*

Let's consider the different forms of government. [W]e come to consider . . . the different number of governments which there are, and what they are; and first, what are their excellencies: for when we have determined this, their defects will be evident enough.

There is a supreme power in each government; it may be held by a single person, a few people, or the people as a whole; the quality of a government should be judged based on how well it serves the common good. It is evident that every form of government . . . must contain a supreme power over the whole state, and this supreme power must necessarily be in the hands of one person, or a few, or many; and when either of these apply their power for the common good, such states are well-governed; but when the interest of the one, the few, or the many who enjoy this power is alone consulted, then ill . . . . We usually call a state which is governed by one person for the common good, a kingdom; one that is governed by more than one, but by only a few, an aristocracy; either because the government is in the hands of the most worthy citizens, or because it is the best form for the city and its inhabitants. When the citizens at large govern for the public good, it is called a state [or a polity] . . . .

There are bad versions of each type of government, too. Now the corruptions attending each of these governments are these; a kingdom may degenerate into a tyranny, an aristocracy into an oligarchy, and a state [or polity] into a democracy. Now a tyranny is a monarch where the good of one man is the object of government, an oligarchy only the rich, and a democracy only the poor; but neither of them have a common good in view.

Aristotle, *The Politics*—Book Five*:*

These are the causes of revolution. The original causes which dispose men to [revolution] are . . . seven in number . . . : . . . profit and honour sharpen men against each other . . . . The other causes are haughtiness, fear, eminence, contempt, disproportionate increase in some part of the state. There are also other things which in a different manner will occasion revolutions in

governments; as election intrigues, neglect, want of numbers, a too great dissimilarity of circumstances.

Aristotle, *The Politics*—Book Eight*:*

Public education is important to the success of a polity; it holds the key to a virtuous people committed to the common good. No one can doubt that the magistrate ought greatly to interest himself in the care of youth; for where it is neglected it is hurtful to the city, for every state ought to be governed according to its particular nature; for the form and manners of each government are peculiar to itself; and these, as they originally established it, so they usually still preserve it. For instance, democratic forms and manners a democracy; oligarchic, an oligarchy: but, universally, the best manners produce the best government. Besides, as in every business and art there are some things which men are to learn first and be made accustomed to, which are necessary to perform their several works; so it is evident that the same thing is necessary in the practice of virtue. As there is one end in view in every city, it is evident that education ought to be one and the same in each; and that this should be a common care . . . . [F]or each one is a part of the state, and it is the natural duty of each part to regard the good of the whole . . . . It is evident, then, that there should be laws concerning education, and that it should be public.

***Bold sentences give the big idea of the excerpt and are not a part of the primary source.**