

Aristotle on the Classification of Constitutions

Aristotle for the first time adopted a scientific method to classify the constitution. His classification is based on the study of 158 constitutions of the ancient world. He has classified the constitution on the basis of the location of sovereign power and end or purpose towards which the power was directed.

Aristotle has classified the constitutions into two broad categories—right or ideal constitution or government, and wrong or perverted form of government. The constitutions which aim at the common interest or good are called the ideal or right constitutions.

From the table below, one can understand Aristotle's classification of the constitution was mainly based on the location of sovereign power and end of the state.

Rule by	Right	Wrong (perverted)
One	Monarchy	Tyranny
Few	Aristocracy	Oligarchy
Many	Polity	Democracy

Aristotle says when a state is ruled by a single person and he runs the state for the welfare and betterment of his subjects, it is **Monarchy**. Monarchy is 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. He gave priority to national interests over his personal wants and gives attention to the suggestions of his subjects. In all his activities, the monarch gives priority to general interests. 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 the ruler becomes corrupt and selfish, monarchy changes in **Tyranny**. 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. In tyranny, the ruler is a single dictator who runs the state administration according to his sweet will. The ruler himself is above any criticism and he is to protect his personal interests. So, in rule of one if the ruler is to work according to people needs, it is Monarchy and its corrupt shape is called Tyranny.

Aristotle also classified aristocracy as one of his "right" constitutions. The ruling class with a group of few men of virtue and wealth and they run the state for the welfare of the society, it is called **Aristocracy**. In Aristotle's view, aristocrats are men of wealth and leisure who have developed their minds so that they have superior intellects. They are to work for the promotion of the general interests and wider national interests are considered superior.

Aristotle believed that these men would only rule for the benefit of all. But when an aristocracy rules only 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.

Aristotle called this moderate mixed constitution a **polity** and believed that it would best serve the common interest of all citizens in most states. In this kind of government, the middle class runs state administration and a large number of citizens participate in this system. Administrators are elected representatives of the people who run the state's administration according to the will and desires of the people. When this ruling class becomes corrupt and selfish, the Polity converts into democracy.

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. He stated that democracy could easily become a tyranny with many heads.

Conclusion

In Aristotle's classifications, there is no place for limited monarchy, a presidential form of government, a parliamentary form of government, a unitary government and the federal government. There is also no scope for a situation when governments change in the order indicated by Aristotle. Despite its shortcomings Aristotle's classification of the constitution is a landmark in political theory.

Dr. Paromita Chakraborty, Political Science, Surendranath College.