

Quadrant II – Transcript and Related Materials

Programme: Bachelor of Arts (T.Y.B.A.)

Subject: Political Science

Paper Code: POC 105

Paper Title: 'Western Political Thinkers (Plato to Locke)'

Unit: Unit 2

Module Name: 'Aristotle's Classification of Government'

Module No:09

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Notes

Unit 2 : Aristotle: Classification of government.

Basis of Classification:

Ancient Greeks did not differentiate between state, government and constitution. So when Aristotle speaks about Constitution, he could have meant state or government. Aristotle was particularly concerned about the prevailing instability of government among the city states of his time, so he tried to develop a model constitution or a government that could ensure political stability. Along with his disciples, he made an empirical study of 158 constitutions of various City- States and tried to produce the classification of government. He also built on Plato's Classification of Government, which is covered in the 'Statesman'. While attempting this classification of governments, Aristotle attributed the differences in constitutions or governments to the capabilities of men and the ends they seek to achieve. The kind of men that formed the government, and the level that they would like to reach. The character of the state is determined by the Constitution. A change in the Constitution generally changes the identity of the state.

A government in a state is constituted on the basis of:

- Birth which would give rise to hereditary form of government like a monarchy
- Wealth which will give rise to governments like oligarchies
- Number, which will give rise to democratic forms of government.

Classification of Government:

Quantitative	Qualitative	
Number of People exercising power	Pure Form	Perverted Form
One	Monarchy	Tyranny
Few	Aristocracy	Oligarchy
Many	Polity	Democracy

Aristotle's classification of governments, can be explained in this table which shows a two-fold classification.

quantitative, i.e. number of people who exercise power

qualitative i.e. pure form or perverted form (the end for which the power is exercised, whether for the promotion of interests of the state or private interests of the ruler.)

When power is used to promote the interest of the state and only one person exercises power, the form of government is monarchy; if ruled by few persons then the government is called Aristocracy and if the number of persons ruling are many then the government is called a polity.

Secondly, if power is used to promote the interest of the ruler and power is exercised by one person, the government is called Tyranny; when ruled by few, it is called Oligarchy and when ruled by many it is called Democracy.

Aristotle's classification is based on two factors, that is quantitative. It depends on the number of persons who exercise sovereign power. It also is qualitative that is the end for which the power is exercised, whether for the promotion of interests of the state or for private interests of the ruler.

Best practicable form of Government:

According to Aristotle the best form of government in the six-fold classification that he gave is Polity. In fact, he said that a government would depend on the period, and there are many factors involved. So according to Aristotle, the best constitution was the one which was most practicable in a given situation. Stability of the Constitution was the only criterion for declaring it as an Ideal. Polity was the best and the most practicable form of Government because it possessed a healthy combination of both liberty and wealth. Polity also known as constitutional government was moderate democracy. So Aristotle, like Plato, was not a supporter of democracy.

Cycle of change of governments:

Aristotle also came to the conclusion that no form of government is permanent or stable without proper checks on the ruler's powers. Governments keep on changing in a sort of a cycle form. So for example, a monarchy would degenerate into tyranny. On the other hand, an aristocracy would evolve into an oligarchy or a polity would degenerate into democracy. Monarchy was good under normal conditions, but in the absence of effective control over the monarch's powers, it degenerates into tyranny, tyranny or dictatorial government. Eventually there will be a response to it, and it will be replaced by a better one in the form of an aristocracy. But when aristocracy also goes unchecked, it can degenerate into oligarchy and in due course an oligarchy is also challenged and replaced by Polity. This Aristotle considered to be the best form of government, because as he said it had many

people exercising power, and also the intent of it was for the interest of the larger people. The Polity may also degenerate into democracy, which may eventually be overthrown by a single virtuous man, and monarchy may be established. This is known as the cycle of change of government.