

SOURCES OF THE DEMOCRATIC TRADITION

Primary Source

As a boy, Aristotle lived at the court of Philip, king of Macedonia. Macedonia was a country located to the north of Greece. Tradition says that Aristotle tutored Phillip's son, Alexander, who became known as Alexander the Great. Later, Aristotle moved to Athens, where he was a student of the philosopher Plato. Ironically, although he wrote a great deal about politics and government, Aristotle was not a citizen of Athens and so could not carry out the duties of citizenship. In this excerpt, Aristotle writes about why governments are overthrown. ♦ *As you read, think about the value Aristotle places on equality. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

From *Politics* by Aristotle

Constitutional governments and aristocracies are commonly overthrown owing to some deviation from justice in the constitution itself; the cause of the downfall is, in the former [constitutional governments], the ill-mingling of the two elements, democracy and oligarchy;¹ in the latter [aristocracies], of the three elements, democracy, oligarchy, and virtue, but especially democracy and oligarchy. For to combine these is the endeavor of constitutional governments; and most of the so-called aristocracies have a like aim, but differ from polities² in the mode of combination; hence some of them are more and some less permanent. Those which incline more to oligarchy are called aristocracies, and those which incline to democracy [are called] constitutional governments. And therefore the latter are the safer of the two; for the greater the number, the greater the strength, and when men are equal



Aristotle

they are contented. But the rich, if the constitution gives them power, are apt to be insolent and avaricious [greedy]; and, in general, whichever way the constitution inclines, in that direction it changes as either party gains strength, a constitutional government becoming a democracy, an aristocracy an oligarchy. But the process may be reversed, and aristocracy may change into democracy. This happens when the poor, under the idea that they are being wronged, force the constitution to take an opposite form. In like manner constitutional governments change into oligarchies. The only stable principle of government is equality according to proportion, and for every man to enjoy his own.³

¹ government in which the ruling power belongs to a few persons

² political or governmental organizations

³ what properly belongs to him

Source: *Politics*, Book V, Part VII, by Aristotle, Benjamin Jowett, trans.

Questions to Think About

1. Which two kinds of government is Aristotle discussing?
2. What two elements in government does Aristotle say can alter their effectiveness?
3. Why does Aristotle believe that constitutional governments are safer and stronger?
4. **Make Generalization** What does Aristotle say about the influence of rich people on government? Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
5. **Activity** Based on Aristotle's views on equality, write a brief essay explaining why you believe guarantees of equality make government stronger.