

SOURCES OF THE DEMOCRATIC TRADITION

Primary Source

In the *Dialogues of Plato*, Plato's hero and teacher Socrates meets with fellow Athenians and discusses important topics. In one of the dialogues, *The Republic*, Socrates shares his ideas about the ideal state. In this excerpt from *The Republic*, Glaucon—Plato's brother—has asked Socrates why states are often run so badly, and what changes Socrates thinks could be made to improve them. ♦ As you read, think about how Socrates' ideas might be received today. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.

From *The Republic* by Plato

[Socrates] Let me next endeavor to show what is that fault in States which is the cause of their present maladministration, and what is the least change which will enable a State to pass into the truer form; and . . . let the changes be as few and slight as possible.

[Glaucon] Certainly, he replied.

[Socrates] I think, I said, that there might be a reform of the State if only one change were made, which is not a slight or easy though still a possible one.

[Glaucon] What is it? he said. . . .

[Socrates] I said: Until philosophers are kings, or the kings and princes of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy, and political greatness and wisdom meet in one, and those commoner natures who pursue either to the exclusion of the other are compelled to stand aside, cities will never have rest from

their evils,—nor the human race, as I believe,—and then only will this our State have a possibility of life and behold the light of day. Such was the thought, my dear Glaucon, which I would fain¹ have uttered if it had not seemed too extravagant; for to be convinced that in no other State can there be happiness private or public is indeed a hard thing.

[Glaucon] Socrates, what do you mean? I would have you consider that the word which you have uttered is one at which numerous

persons, and very respectable persons too . . . seizing any weapon that comes to hand, will run at you might and main,² before you know where you are, intending to do heaven knows what. . . .



Socrates

¹ glad(ly)

² vigorously

Source: *The Republic*, Book V, by Plato, Benjamin Jowett, trans.

Questions to Think About

1. What change does Socrates recommend that would improve how governments are run?
2. What two qualities does Socrates say must be combined in a good ruler?
3. **Demonstrate Reasoned Judgment** What do you think the leaders of the United States would say about Socrates' ideas?
4. **Activity** Write a short persuasive essay describing one change you would make to improve society or the government. Include reasons to support your ideas.