



Section 1

PRIMARY SOURCE from *Politics*
by Aristotle

The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) wrote influential books on many different topics, including biology, rhetoric, poetry, and politics. In Politics, Aristotle distinguishes among many kinds of government, including several possibilities for democracy, which is sometimes defined as government by the many, and oligarchy, which is often defined as government by a few. In this selection, Aristotle outlines the importance of a large middle class.

The best political community is formed by citizens of the middle class, and . . . those states are likely to be well administered, in which the middle class is large, and stronger if possible than both the other classes, or at any rate than either singly; for the addition of the middle class turns the scale, and prevents either of the extremes from being dominant. Great then is the good fortune of a state in which the citizens have a moderate and sufficient property; for where some possess much, and the others nothing, there may arise an extreme democracy, or a pure oligarchy; or a tyranny may grow out of either extreme—either out of the most rampant democracy, or out of an oligarchy; but it is not so likely to arise out of the middle constitutions and those akin to them. . . . The mean condition of states is clearly best, for no other is free from faction; and where the middle class is large, there are least likely to be factions and dissensions. For a similar reason large states are less liable to faction than small ones, because in them the middle class is large; whereas in small states it is easy to divide all the citizens into two classes who are either rich or poor, and to leave nothing in the middle. And democracies are safer and more permanent than oligarchies, because they have a middle class which is more numerous and has a greater share in the government; for when there is not middle class, and the poor greatly exceed in number, troubles arise, and the state soon comes to an end. . . .

The legislator should always include the middle class in his government; if he makes his laws oligarchical, to the middle class let him look; if he makes them democratical, he should equally by his laws try to attach this class to the state. There only can the government ever be stable where the middle class exceeds one or both of the others, and in that case there will be no fear that the rich will unite with the poor against the rulers. For neither of them will ever be willing to serve the other, and if they look for some form of government more suitable to both, they will find none better than this, for the rich and the poor will never consent to rule in turn, because they mistrust one another. The arbiter is always the one trusted, and he who is in the middle is an arbiter. The more perfect the admixture of the political elements, the more lasting will be the constitution.

from "Politics" in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, Richard McKeon, ed. (New York: Random House, 1941), 1221–1223.

Discussion Questions

- Determining Main Ideas** According to Aristotle, what are the advantages of having a large middle class?
- Forming and Supporting Opinions** Do you agree that a constitution be "more lasting" when a large middle class is the "arbiter," or the one who has the power to decide? Why or why not?