

Aristotle's Middle Constitution (*Pol.* 4.11)

1. *The Project: a generally accessible ideal, conceived as a yardstick*

T1 *Pol.* 4.2, 1289b12-17

ἡμῖν δὲ πρῶτον μὲν <1> διαιρετέον πόσαι διαφοραὶ τῶν πολιτειῶν, εἴπερ ἔστιν εἶδη πλείονα τῆς τε δημοκρατίας καὶ τῆς ὀλιγαρχίας, **ἔπειτα <2> τίς κοινοτάτη καὶ [15] τίς αἰρετωτάτη μετὰ τὴν ἀρίστην πολιτείαν, κἂν εἴ τις ἄλλη τετύχηκεν ἀριστοκρατικὴ καὶ συνεστῶσα καλῶς, ἀλλὰ ταῖς πλείσταις ἀρμόττουσα πόλεσι, τίς ἐστίν**, ἔπειτα <3> καὶ τῶν ἄλλων τίς τίσιν αἰρετή (τάχα γὰρ τοῖς μὲν ἀναγκαῖα δημοκρατία μᾶλλον ὀλιγαρχία, τοῖς δ' αὐτῆ μᾶλλον ἐκείνης) , [20] μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα <4> τίνα τρόπον δεῖ καθιστάναι τὸν βουλόμενον ταύτας τὰς πολιτείας, λέγω δὲ δημοκρατίας τε καθ' ἕκαστον εἶδος καὶ πάλιν ὀλιγαρχίας: τέλος δὲ <5>, πάντων τούτων ὅταν ποιησώμεθα συντόμως τὴν ἐνδεχομένην μνείαν, πειρατέον ἐπελθεῖν τίνες φθοραὶ καὶ τίνες σωτηρίαὶ τῶν πολιτειῶν [25] καὶ κοινῇ καὶ χωρὶς ἐκάστης, καὶ διὰ τίνας αἰτίας ταῦτα μάλιστα γίνεσθαι πέφυκεν.

Our business is first <1> to distinguish how many different forms of the constitutions there are, assuming that there do exist several kinds of democracy and of oligarchy; next <2>, which form is the most capable of being shared (Schofield), **translating κοινοτάτην [or most general (Rackham)/the most generally acceptable (Barker) or has the most of what is common about it (Phillips Simpson)/la plus commun (Pellegrin)] and which most desirable after the best constitution, and also if there exists some other form that is aristocratic in nature and well-constructed but fitted** ['not fitted', Rackham, **inserting οὐ: probably a needless textual emendation; MSS have just ἀλλὰ]** to the largest number of cities, which this is?; next <3>, which of the other forms too is desirable for what people (since probably for some democracy is necessary more than oligarchy, and for others oligarchy more than democracy); [20] and after this <4>, in what way should someone proceed who wishes to set up these constitutions, I mean the various forms of democracy and of oligarchy; and finally <5>, when as far as possible we have concisely touched upon all these questions, we must endeavour to review what are the agencies that destroy and what are those that preserve constitutions generally and each variety of constitution in particular, and what are the causes by which it is most natural for these events to be brought about.

Translations of Politics passages are from H. Rackham's Loeb, mostly modified, sometimes heavily.

T2 *Pol.* 4.11, 1295a25-34

τίς δ' ἀρίστη πολιτεία καὶ τίς ἄριστος βίος ταῖς πλείσταις πόλεσι καὶ τοῖς πλείστοις τῶν ἀνθρώπων, μήτε πρὸς ἀρετὴν συγκρίνουσι τὴν ὑπὲρ τοὺς ἰδιώτας, μήτε πρὸς παιδείαν ἢ φύσεως δεῖται καὶ χορηγίας τυχερᾶς, μήτε πρὸς πολιτείαν τὴν κατ' εὐχὴν γινομένην, ἀλλὰ βίον τε τὸν τοῖς [30] πλείστοις κοινωνῆσαι δυνατόν καὶ πολιτείαν ἧς τὰς πλείστας πόλεις ἐνδέχεται μετασχεῖν; καὶ γὰρ ἄς καλοῦσιν ἀριστοκρατίας, περιῶν νῦν εἵπομεν, τὰ μὲν ἐξωτέρω πίπτουσι ταῖς πλείσταις τῶν πόλεων, τὰ δὲ γειννῶσι τῇ καλουμένῃ πολιτείᾳ (διὸ περὶ ἀμφοῖν ὡς μιᾶς λεκτέον).

But what is the best constitution and what is the best mode of life for most cities and most of mankind, if we do not judge by the standard of a virtue that is above the level of private citizens or of an education that needs natural gifts and means supplied by fortune, nor by the standard of the ideal constitution, but of a mode of life able to be shared by most men and a constitution possible for most cities to attain? For the constitutions usually called aristocracies, of which we spoke just now, in some cases fall somewhat out of the scope of most cities, and in others approximate to what is usually called citizen government (polity), so that it is proper to speak of these two forms as if they were one.

T3 Pol. 4.11, 1296b2-13

τίς μὲν οὖν ἀρίστη πολιτεία, καὶ διὰ τίν' αἰτίαν, ἐκ τούτων φανερόν:
 τῶν δ' ἄλλων πολιτειῶν, ἐπειδὴ πλείους δημοκρατίας καὶ
 πλείους ὀλιγαρχίας φαμὲν [5] εἶναι, ποίαν πρώτην θετέον καὶ
 δευτέραν καὶ τοῦτον δὴ τὸν τρόπον ἐχομένην τῷ τὴν μὲν εἶναι
 βελτίω τὴν δὲ χεῖρω, διωρισμένης τῆς ἀρίστης οὐ χαλεπὸν
 ἰδεῖν. αἰεὶ γὰρ ἀναγκαῖον εἶναι βελτίω τὴν ἐγγύτατα ταύτης,
 χεῖρω δὲ τὴν ἀφεστηκυῖαν τοῦ μέσου πλεῖον, ἂν μὴ πρὸς
 ὑπόθεσιν κρίνη τις. λέγω [10] δὲ τὸ πρὸς ὑπόθεσιν, ὅτι
 πολλακίς, οὕσης ἄλλης πολιτείας αἰρετωτέρας, ἐνίοις οὐδὲν
 κωλύει συμφέρειν ἕτεραν μᾶλλον εἶναι πολιτείαν.

These considerations therefore make it clear which is the best constitution, and why it is the best; and now that the best has been defined, it is not difficult to see, among the other forms of constitution (inasmuch as we pronounce that there are various forms of democracy and various oligarchies), what kind is to be placed first, what second, and what next in this order, by reason of one being better and another worse. For at each stage the form nearest to the best one must necessarily be superior, and the form that is more remote from the middle must be inferior—unless one is judging relatively to given conditions: I make this reservation because it is quite possible that although one form of constitution is preferable it may often be more advantageous for certain people to have another form.

2. *The Ideal Specified*

T4 (after T2) Pol. 4.11, 1283a34-b1

ἢ δὲ δὴ κρίσις περὶ [35] ἀπάντων
 τούτων ἐκ τῶν αὐτῶν στοιχείων ἐστίν. εἰ γὰρ καλῶς ἐν τοῖς
 ἠθικοῖς εἴρηται τὸ τὸν εὐδαίμονα βίον εἶναι τὸν κατ' ἀρετὴν
 ἀνεμπόδιστον, μεσότητα δὲ τὴν ἀρετὴν, τὸν μέσον ἀναγκαῖον
 εἶναι βίον βέλτιστον, τὸ τῆς ἐκάστοις ἐνδεχομένης τυχεῖν
 μεσότητος: τοὺς δὲ αὐτοὺς τούτους ὅρους ἀναγκαῖον εἶναι [40]
 καὶ πόλεως ἀρετῆς καὶ κακίας καὶ πολιτείας: ἢ γὰρ πολιτεία
 βίος τίς ἐστι πόλεως.

But the decision in regard to all these questions is based on the same elementary principles. For if it has been rightly said in the *Ethics* that the happy life is the life that is lived without impediment in accordance with virtue, and that virtue is a middle course, it necessarily follows that the middle course of life is the best—such a middle course as it is possible for each to attain. And these same criteria must also necessarily apply to the goodness and badness of a city, and of a constitution—for its constitution is the mode of life embraced by a city (considered from one particular angle).

T5 Pol. 4.11, 1295b13-28

πρὸς δὲ τούτοις οἱ μὲν ἐν ὑπεροχαῖς εὐτυχημάτων ὄντες, ἰσχύος καὶ πλοῦτου καὶ φίλων [15] καὶ τῶν ἄλλων τῶν τοιούτων, ἄρχεσθαι οὔτε βούλονται οὔτε ἐπίστανται (καὶ τοῦτ' εὐθύς οἴκοθεν ὑπάρχει παισὶν οὓσιν: διὰ γὰρ τὴν τρυφήν οὐδ' ἐν τοῖς διδασκαλείοις ἄρχεσθαι σὺνηθες αὐτοῖς, οἱ δὲ καθ' ὑπερβολὴν ἐν ἐνδείᾳ τούτων ταπεινοὶ λίαν. ὥσθ' οἱ μὲν ἄρχειν οὐκ ἐπίστανται, ἀλλ' ἄρχεσθαι [20] δουλικὴν ἀρχὴν, οἱ δ' ἄρχεσθαι μὲν οὐδεμίαν ἀρχὴν, ἄρχειν δὲ δεσποτικὴν ἀρχὴν. γίνεται οὖν δούλων καὶ δεσποτῶν πόλις, ἀλλ' οὐκ ἐλευθέρων, καὶ τῶν μὲν φθονούντων τῶν δὲ καταφρονούντων: **ἂ πλεῖστον ἀπέχει φιλίας καὶ κοινωνίας πολιτικῆς: ἡ γὰρ κοινωνία φιλικόν: οὐδὲ γὰρ ὁδοῦ βούλονται [25] κοινωνεῖν τοῖς ἐχθροῖς. βούλεται δὲ γε ἡ πόλις ἐξ ἴσων εἶναι καὶ ὁμοίων ὅτι μάλιστα, τοῦτο δ' ὑπάρχει μάλιστα τοῖς μέσοις. ὥστ' ἀναγκαῖον ἄριστα πολιτεύεσθαι ταύτην τὴν πόλιν ἐστὶν ἐξ ὧν φαμὲν φύσει τὴν σύστασιν εἶναι τῆς πόλεως.**

And in addition to these points, those who have an excess of fortune's goods, strength, wealth, friends and the like, are not willing to be ruled and do not know how to be (and they have acquired this quality even in their boyhood from their homelife, which was so luxurious that they did not get used to submitting to authority even in school), while those who are excessively in need of these things are too abject. Hence the latter class do not know how to rule but only how to submit to [20] rule appropriate for slaves, while the former class do not know how to submit to any rule, but only how to rule in the manner of a master. The result is a city consisting of slaves and masters, not of free men, and of one class envious, another contemptuous of the other. **This condition of affairs is very far removed from friendship, and from political community—for friendliness is an element of community, since men are not willing to be partners even on a journey with their enemies. But the ideal for the city is to consist so far as possible of persons who are equal and alike. And this desideratum is realised particularly among the middle class. That city will necessarily, therefore, best conduct its political life when constituted of the sorts of person of which we are saying the city is by nature composed.**

T6 Pol. 4.11,1295b34-40 □ δῆλον [35] ἄρα ὅτι καὶ ἡ κοινωνία ἢ πολιτικὴ ἀρίστη ἢ διὰ τῶν μέσων, καὶ τὰς τοιαύτας ἐνδέχεται εὖ πολιτεύεσθαι πόλεις ἐν αἷς δὴ πολὺ τὸ μέσον καὶ κρεῖττον, μάλιστα μὲν ἀμφοῖν, εἰ δὲ μὴ, θατέρου μέρους: προστιθέμενον γὰρ ποιεῖ ῥοπήν καὶ κωλύει γίνεσθαι τὰς ἐναντίας ὑπερβολάς. διόπερ εὐτυχία [40] μεγίστη τοὺς πολιτευομένους οὐσίαν ἔχειν μέσην καὶ ἱκανήν.

It is clear therefore also that the political community based on the middle class is the best, and that **it is possible for those cities to be well governed that are of the kind in which the middle class is numerous, and preferably stronger than both the other two classes, or at all events than one of them, for by throwing in its weight it sways the balance and prevents the opposite extremes from coming into existence.** Hence it is the greatest good fortune if the people involved in political life possess a moderate and sufficient substance.

3. The legislator's task

T7 Pol. 4.11.1296a7-16

ὅτι δ' ἡ μέση βελτίστη, φανερόν· μόνη γὰρ ἀστασίαστος· ὅπου γὰρ πολὺ τὸ διὰ μέσου, ἥκιστα στάσεις καὶ διαστάσεις γίνονται τῶν πολιτῶν. καὶ αἱ μεγάλαι πόλεις ἀστασιαστότεραι διὰ τὴν αὐτὴν αἰτίαν, ὅτι πολὺ τὸ μέσον· ἐν δὲ ταῖς μικραῖς ῥαδίον τε διαλαβεῖν εἰς δύο πάντας, ὥστε μηθὲν

καταλιπεῖν μέσον, καὶ πάντες σχεδὸν ἄποροι ἢ εὐποροὶ εἰσι. καὶ αἱ δημοκρατίαι δὲ ἀσφαλέστεραι τῶν ὀλιγαρχιῶν εἰσι καὶ πολυχρονιώτεραι διὰ τοὺς μέσους (πλείους τε γὰρ εἰσι καὶ μᾶλλον μετέχουσι τῶν τιμῶν ἐν ταῖς δημοκρατίαις ἢ ταῖς ὀλιγαρχίαις).

The mean condition of cities 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 cities are less liable to faction than small ones, because in them the middle class is large; whereas in small cities 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 honours of rule.

T8 *Pol.* 4.12, 1296b34-1297a7

δεῖ δ' [35] αἰεὶ τὸν νομοθέτην ἐν τῇ πολιτείᾳ προσλαμβάνειν τοὺς μέσους: ἂν τε γὰρ ὀλιγαρχικοὺς τοὺς νόμους τιθῆ, στοχάζεσθαι χρὴ τῶν μέσων, ἐάν τε δημοκρατικούς, προσάγεσθαι τοῖς νόμοις τούτους. ὅπου δὲ τὸ τῶν μέσων ὑπερτείνει πλῆθος ἢ συναμφοτέρων τῶν ἄκρων ἢ καὶ θατέρου μόνον, ἐνταῦθ' ἐνδέχεται [40] πολιτείαν εἶναι μόνιμον. [1297α] οὐθὲν γὰρ φοβερόν μή ποτε συμφωνήσωσιν οἱ πλούσιοι τοῖς πένησιν ἐπὶ τούτους: οὐδέποτε γὰρ ἄτεροι βουλήσονται δουλεύειν τοῖς ἐτέροις, κοινοτέραν δ', ἂν ζητῶσιν, οὐδεμίαν εὐρήσουσιν ἄλλην ταύτης. ἐν μέρει γὰρ ἄρχειν οὐκ ἂν ὑπομείναιαν διὰ τὴν ἀπιστίαν [5] τὴν πρὸς ἀλλήλους: πανταχοῦ δὲ πιστότατος ὁ διαιτητής, διαιτητής δ' ὁ μέσος.

But in his constitution the lawgiver must always take in the middle class; if he is making the laws of an oligarchical character he must keep the middle class in his sights, and if democratic, he must legislate so as to bring them in. And where the number of the middle class exceeds both the extreme classes together, or even one of them only, here it is possible for a constitution to be lasting; for there is no fear of the rich ever coming to terms with the poor against such a middle class; for neither class will ever wish to be subject to the other, and if they look for another constitution more communal than this they will not find one, for they would not endure to take turns to govern, because they distrust each other: everywhere it is the arbitrator that is most trusted, and the man in the middle is an arbitrator.

T9 *Pol.* 5.1.1302a8-15

ὁμως δὲ ἀσφαλεστέρα καὶ ἀστασίαστος μᾶλλον ἢ δημοκρατία τῆς ὀλιγαρχίας. ἐν μὲν γὰρ ταῖς ὀλιγαρχίαις ἐγγίνονται δύο, ἢ τε πρὸς ἀλλήλους στάσις καὶ ἔτι ἢ πρὸς τὸν δῆμον, ἐν δὲ ταῖς δημοκρατίαις ἢ πρὸς τὴν ὀλιγαρχίαν μόνον, αὐτῷ δὲ πρὸς αὐτόν, ὃ τι καὶ ἄξιον εἶπεῖν, οὐκ ἐγγίνεται τῷ δήμῳ στάσις· ἔτι δὲ ἢ ἐκ τῶν μέσων πολιτεία ἐγγυτέρω τοῦ δήμου ἢ ἢ τῶν ὀλίγων· ἥπερ ἐστὶν ἀσφαλεστάτη τῶν τοιούτων πολιτειῶν.

Still democracy appears to be safer and less liable to civil faction than oligarchy. For in oligarchies there is the double danger of the oligarchs falling out among themselves and also with the people; but in democracies there is only the danger of faction with the oligarchs. No dissension worth mentioning arises among the people themselves. And we may further remark that a polity which is based on the middle class more nearly approximates to democracy than to oligarchy, and is the safest of such forms of constitutions.