Plato’s Republic vs. Democracy
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Introduction
In this era when individuals are questioning the legitimacy and wisdom of unregulated free markets, issues are raised about the most efficient form of economic activity and the best role for government in an economy. These issues have been discussed at many points in the past, and different societies have come to different conclusions regarding political and economic systems. In the United States, and many developed nations around the world, the view has often been that democracy accompanied by capitalism, offers the best, most efficient use of resources and governments guided by those principles assure the best outcomes for their populations.

Other countries have adopted very different governing principles. Communist doctrine, as adopted by some nations, endorses the establishment of an egalitarian, classless, stateless society based on common ownership of the means of production and property (Communism: The failure of an utopian system, 2008). The civilization is governed by an individual, or individuals, whose function is to ensure the efficiency of the society as a whole. As an ideal, the communist doctrine defines a just city as one that eliminates the need for its citizens to wish to exploit each other. History appears to indicate that in practice, however, the communist vision cannot be fulfilled since “absolute power (which is given to the leader) corrupts absolutely” (Martin, 2009). Human nature does not appear to manage total supremacy well.
When authorities are left unchallenged, their characters appear to be altered, inverting their true selves with alter egos incapable of putting the welfare of others before their own.

History provides examples of autocrats who brought tragedy and devastation to the people that they governed. Many were appointed in an attempt to bring relief in times of turmoil, but ended up by using their political prowess to dictate and oppress. Adolf Hitler, once a social misfit, became one of history’s most infamous tyrants whose attainment of power spiraled from the aftermath of the Treaty of Versailles (Hitler's foreign policy, 2007). Against the backdrop of these various choices made by different nations throughout history, democracies have viewed the choice of that political system as obviously superior. Current events, however, once again raise questions about the optimal means of governance and the optimal form of economic activity that accompanies it.

While the track record of ruling individuals, or classes, is somewhat spotty, the concept of a ruling elite finds a strong proponent in the philosopher Plato. While recognizing the fundamental flaw in humankind so clearly manifested in the “Hitlers” of the world, Plato believed in the appointment of one supreme guardian (the philosopher king), an individual, who with the proper education, was competent enough to decide on legislative policies. In Plato’s work *The Republic*, such a knowledgeable being determines the laws in the city. Plato believed that the philosopher king was incorruptible since his only desire was knowledge (his thirst for knowledge surmounting that of any vice).

In spite of history’s lessons, is it plausible to believe that a society can be governed in such a manner? Or is democracy, “[where] the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must” (Boyle, 2007), the ideal form of governance when the true nature of humankind is considered? Further, given the current and past crises arising out of capitalism accompanied by democracy, could it be true that democracy is no less flawed than those other forms of governance? Plato’s arguments, made so long ago, resonate in the current world in much the same way as they did when they first appeared. Times of crisis remind us of the need for ongoing review of the assumptions we
make regarding the best way to govern and the best way to manage those scarce resources available to us. Plato provided one view of the best form of government, and consequently, offers some insight into the issues under review today.

The Just State
*The Republic* was arguably Plato’s most influential work. It portrays several dialogues between the philosopher Socrates and several observers in which they discuss a political theory for a just state. The central belief is that “justice and happiness stand and fall together. Not because good consequences...follow from being just, but because justice itself is so great that nothing gained by injustice could be greater” (Boyle, 2007).

Socrates unified a just person and a just city, claiming that an individual’s soul contains three parts (three desires). The first part is the desire for wisdom and truth, the second for honor, and the last for gains. The individual’s parts correspond to those of a city’s. The portion of the soul that desires wisdom and truth is the principle role of the guardians of a city. The portion that desires honor is the principle role of the auxiliaries. The last portion that desires gains is the principle role of the producing class.

Socrates believes that “guardians” should run a city because they are the only ones with the knowledge and the desire to do so. When contrasting this doctrine to the democratic process in American society, the question is raised as to whether Socrates’ republic would be more practical. A democracy allows for virtually all to take part in the election of a leader (with the possible exceptions of children, illegal immigrants and convicts). Campaigns may span years during which candidates debate in a national forum. Interviews are held to allow voters to gain knowledge of the candidates’ policies.

In spite of this, how many Americans evaluate all policies and subsequently vote based on what is relevant to them? In fact, how many Americans understand the relevance of so many events that would allow them to make a truly informed decision? The media portray a narrow-
minded view of the world, showing only portions of what could impact life in the States. Many people knew nothing about Afghanistan and the injustices forced upon its people by the Taliban, until the events of 9/11. If people are not fully informed about events, domestic and foreign, then how can they understand any candidate’s proposed policies?

Without complete and relevant information, the American democratic election process becomes a popularity contest. People favor the charismatic contender whether he is the best candidate or not. Is this how a country should be governed? To allow the public to vote based on emotions rather than an informed decision could be detrimental to the structure of a society. The logical conclusion is that it may be best to allow those who are truly informed (the wise) to determine what is best for the group.

Those individuals who might disagree with such an idea on the basis that it is undemocratic should be advised that such practices already occur in democratic states. By its nature, a democracy allows for elected leadership to make decisions for the group. Events are concealed from the public at large for a variety of reasons, homeland security being a popular rationale currently. Given the power that this endows in a leadership, it stands to reason that such a leadership should be made up of the best, most informed, minds available.

**Plato’s View of Democracy**
Plato showed no fondness for democracy (where power is held by the people) because he believed that not all members of society were capable of making wise decisions. As voiced through Socrates, the Platonic principle is that only a few people in a just city (those individuals known as the philosophers) possess the principle portion of the soul that desires for truth and wisdom. Since this portion forms the majority of the philosophers’ souls, these individuals will primarily strive for truth and wisdom. Furthermore, since this portion of their souls is also rational, this ruling cadre will be just, assuring that the city they rule is also just.
Justice does not form the basis of rule in a capitalistic society, and by extension, will have a lesser role in a democratic republic. In a capitalistic system, where free markets (uncontrolled by the government) are endorsed, buyers and sellers come together in the exchange of goods and services. Money has a large influence in this society. America’s strength lies in its wealth. It plays a role in United States (U.S.) foreign policy tools (where sanctions and embargos are used to coerce other nations), and in U.S. domestic affairs (where tax policies and government contracts spread wealth to specific groups of citizens).

Plato did not believe in money because he understood its power to corrupt. He believed that a society would be happier without it. When questioned how the city would defend itself without money, Socrates replied in *The Republic* that neighboring cities would come to their aid when promised the spoils of war. In contrast today, in the name of advancing democracy, war may be viewed as a source of increasing national wealth; manipulating oil sources in Iraq is justified since the country’s government was overthrown to be remade in an image viewed as preferable.

Leaders not motivated by justice will find ways to rationalize immoral actions, or inactions, using the ends (increased wealth or control) to justify the means. Instances of inaction include the examples of the lack of attention paid to countries like Darfur and Rwanda where genocide occurs while the Western world turns a blind eye. Democratic nations see no political gain to be had from interference in foreign governments where innocent people suffer but no wealth or control is to be gained.

*The Republic* proposed the view that morality outweighs rationality. If money and wealth are not at the forefront of society’s value system, morality dictates that all societies will be on an equal footing. In consequence, a society will have fewer wars since there would not be financial gains to be desired and mutual respect across nations would forbid war being used as a means of control of other nations.
Leadership Determination

A distinction between the democratic state and Plato’s Republic lies in the appointment of its leaders. “Democratic elections are...competitive, periodic, inclusive, definitive elections in which the chief decision-makers in a government are selected by citizens who enjoy broad freedom to criticize government, to publish their criticism and to present alternatives” (What is democracy?, 2008). In a democracy, after the candidates have campaigned and voiced their policies, the people are called upon to vote.

In the U.S. version of democracy, people do not vote directly for a president. They are in fact voting for an elector who is a part of the Electoral College. The elector then votes for the candidate to whom he or she is pledged. The candidate with the largest number of electoral votes wins the Presidency. This indirect method of choosing who fills the highest office in the land may work well but relies on electors fulfilling their pledge and may create distrust in voters. In the election of Bush versus Gore, where each candidate was declared the winner at different intervals, confidence in the system was severely strained. Greater transparency and clarity in the system might create greater trust in the voting public and greater confidence in the outcome. Further, the question raised earlier regarding the motives of democratic leaders that value gain more than morality, is likely to lead to distrust in the population. Leaders motivated by wealth are susceptible to temptation and may not be trusted to do the right thing.

A system like that electoral system used in U.S. presidential elections is not consistent with Plato’s vision on two levels. First, the average individual may not have the wisdom to be involved in the appointment of a leader and second, potential leaders’ abilities should be carefully and objectively scrutinized before nomination. Those individuals that Plato described as “guardians” are the only ones with the knowledge, wisdom and virtue to run a just city. They are the ones with the education and the thirst for knowledge to make decisions based on morals rather than emotions.
Moreover, of all the guardians, one particular philosopher is needed to govern the city: the philosopher-king. In the Platonic system, guardians were subjected to several tests in order to determine which of that select group could be that king. The most important test was their grasp of the idea of the “Form of the Good” (described by Socrates as “beyond being” - the origin of life). Through their understanding of this idea, the selected guardian would reach the highest level of knowledge and be capable of becoming the philosopher-king.

This ruler was described as the supreme ruler who is at the top of a hierarchy, followed by the auxiliaries, and finally the producing class. For Plato, this described the perfect society—a leadership capable of, and a system designed to optimize the happiness of its citizens.

The strength of Plato’s political vision is not dissimilar from that of a democratic, capitalistic system in that it recognizes the strength of reward to motivate behavior. Where it differs is that the guardians were not to be rewarded with private wealth, given their natures (carefully selected individuals) their reward was what they most desired, that is truth and wisdom. Such a city was designed to be free of corruption. The auxiliaries, whose primary desire was for honor, act as helpers to the guardians and police the producing class who are those who desire gain.

All parts of the city are rewarded with what they most desire and each sector’s desire guarantees the overall happiness of all. These rewards are not monetary, as there is no money in the city, thereby removing a major source of corruption. A potential strength of a Republic as envisioned by Plato is that it is governed by a small group. With few in leadership roles, it is easy to congregate, set an agenda and come to a united agreement. This government of small numbers allows for order and unity.

**Weaknesses of the Platonic Ideal and of Democracy**

The weakness of Plato’s vision is that it requires exceptionally high standards for the moral nature of human beings. In this view, Plato puts
a great deal of emphasis on the soul as rational and assumes that people, who choose occupations based on their desires, will be just.

What about those who use their passions to deceive and manipulate? For instance, “Machiavellians...check their passions so that they can practice even greater injustice” (Boyle, 2007). According to Plato’s doctrine, given that they are following the desires of their rational soul, they must be behaving in a just manner. Another weakness of this doctrine is that it puts too much power in the hands of a selected few. It is dangerous to allow so few to govern so many. Without the checks and balances seen in a democratic society, an environment of tyranny is fostered.

In contrast, a weakness of democracy is that the masses are given the ability to govern the country. As a group, they are susceptible to a “group think” mentality; voting based on the collective mentality rather than individual ideals. Economic gain is central in a capitalist society and will influence people’s decision making. The group may vote based on emotions rather than thought. Also, a large number of people may be unable to focus on one agenda since different people have different ideals, agendas and motivations. That said, it may be safer to leave power in the hands of the many rather than the hands of the few and collectively people may object to that which seems tyrannical.

Plato’s doctrine seems to center around “theocracy...militarism, nationalism, hierarchy, liberalism, totalitarianism, and the complete disdain of economic structures of society” (Boyle, 2007). A republic such as this has never existed, making it an ideal. The dilemma with idealism is that it is counter-intuitive to reality. Ideals may not function in reality. They serve more as a moral compass than an actual function basis of governance. So what is the solution? The best form of governance is that which combines idealism and realism.

**What Is the Ideal Form of Governance?**

Is the best form of governance the original form of democracy, as mapped by the founding fathers, grounded by economic realities regarding the greed of some individuals, rather than the democracy of today where unfettered capitalism creates periodic crisis? The current
interpretation of democracy appears to work better for some members of society than others and often democratic ideals are sacrificed (again for some) in order to accommodate the so-called free markets which appear to be freer for some then they are for others.

The founding fathers believed that in an ideal society those who own property, have an income and meet age requirements, should govern the country and fight its wars. The reason is that they are the individuals who have the most to lose. In today’s society, the vast majority of these people would be the middle class. They pay the majority of the nation’s taxes and own a large proportion of its land. Because of this, the middle class would fight harder in wars and choose a leader whose policies are best for the collective. Following this argument, the poor should not vote because they may not truly be informed about politics and have less to lose should poor decisions about leadership be made. Their primary concern is likely to be to vote for leaders who would distribute more aid to them.

Again reality intrudes on such an argument. The middle class shows no sign of an inclination to sign up for military life to defend their way of life. Rather they are content to allow the poor to do so. And the middle class is no less likely to vote to promote their own welfare than the poor, regardless of what might be in the best interests of the nation overall. Relegating the poor to the sidelines of power raises the specter of racism as well, an ongoing American problem. Poverty is frequently identified with black and Hispanic citizens and a larger proportion of those citizens are likely to be poor. The ideal of democracy, as originally envisioned, would serve to amplify the problems of racism, alienate a large group of minority families from the political process and further drive a wedge between the races. The reality of economics again intrudes on the historic democratic ideal.

**Conclusion**
In modern America, it is best that all people participate in their society’s governance. In spite of Plato’s arguments and any inconvenience and inefficiency, placing the reins of democracy in the hands of the masses
is safer than relegating power to only a few. Plato was correct in requiring that leaders be informed, and equally correct in believing that the uniformed masses are less likely to make good decisions, but the way to address this is not to exclude people. Rather, as part of the political process, people should be educated about all of the facets of the process, as well as about the candidates, their policies and political ideologies.

In addition to education about the candidates and the process, the population requires a more general education in order to allow it to follow its desires, in terms of career and the contribution that each individual might make to society. As in *The Republic*, allowing people to perform jobs which best suit their desires would give each individual a stake in the welfare of the nation overall, allowing for a more efficient use of labor resources and a motivation for all members of society to work for the collective good of the whole.

Given the economic realities of capitalism, where some have resources to manipulate the government in their own best interests, modern democracy requires some reining in of free markets. The reality of greed and the existence of those who would put their own desires before the welfare of the nation overall, necessitate a government that regulates those who control more resources. In other words, economic realities cannot be ignored or wished away as in a Platonic ideal. But just as the communist ideal seems somewhat naïve in a modern era, so is the concept of unfettered capitalism as the only efficient economic system.

The greatest contribution of Plato to our modern understanding of appropriate governance may be the emphasis the philosopher placed on the power of knowledge and wisdom. Some investment in those attributes might allow for a better informed voter and a more reasonable form of government where democratic ideal is blended with an understanding of economic necessity and the realities of human nature. Perhaps what has become most apparent from the current crisis is that some sense of collective good, as well as a sense of collective responsibility, must be incorporated into the notion of democracy.
References


