



Collective choice in Aristotle

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Abstract

In his *Politics* VI 3, 1318a–b, Aristotle discusses constitutional procedures for achieving justice in a society where its classes have different views on it. He analyzes the case of a society consisting in two groups, the poor and the rich, each holding a specific understanding of justice (democratic or oligarchic). In this paper we give, first, a non-formal summary of this section of *Politics*. Then we approach it in the framework of social choice theory and argue that a social rule for selecting between alternatives may be extracted from it. As Aristotle argued, this rule is consistent with the views on justice and equality of the supporters of both democracy and oligarchy. Finally, we study its properties, as well as some extensions of it when multiple classes are allowed or more than two alternatives are present.

Keywords Democracy · Oligarchy · Majority · Weighted majority · Social choice · Aristotle

JEL Classification D70 · D71 · N43

“At its most general and fundamental level Aristotle’s analysis of the polis is a highly abstract exercise in rational choice theory.” (Schofield 2005, p. 318).

1 Aristotle’s *Politics* VI 3, 1317a–1318b

At the beginning of Book VI of his *Politics*, after having discussed various kinds of constitutions, Aristotle turns to “the fundamental principles, character, and aims of the various kinds of democracy”¹ (1317a 35–39). What he claims there can fairly be summarized as follows. The goal of a democratic constitution is freedom (1317b 1–15; cf. also 1317a 40), and in a free society each one “lives as one likes” (1317b

¹ The quotations from Aristotle’s *Politics* are in Reeve’s translation (Aristotle 1998).

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