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The Riddle of the Middle: Questioning the Interpretation of the Mixed or Middle-Class Regime of Aristotle's *Politics*

Abstract: This paper challenges the argument of the middle-class regime as the embodiment of the mixed regime and is presented as the best regime in practice, or the best regime in most cities. Instead of an account of the best practical regime, that is, of a specific regime form, Aristotle gives one an account on how regimes can achieve moderation and harmony – that is stability through ensuring the role of the *meso*, the middle, which is between the wealthy and the poor. Aristotle, in his account of this middle and its superiority to either the wealthy and the poor, we navigate through the meaning of what the middle element truly is. So, instead of an account of a specific regime type, we get an account of what moderates and stabilizes regimes generally.

Key words: Aristotle's *Politics*, polity, middle class, middle class regime, mixed regime

Introduction

It is commonly argued that through *Politics* 4 chapter 11, Aristotle presents the argument for the middle-class regime as the frame for how the so-called mixed regime (or “polity,” as termed in most translations of *Politics*).¹ Rather, it is my main contention that instead of arguing for a particular variety of regime or arguing for the leadership of what we today understand as the “middle class,” Aristotle’s discussion of the “meso” is more about the desire for a multitude or population of the city in possession of enough or a moderate amount of means (*poroi*), or resources, beyond that of their mere body, to ensure that the given regime avoids the pitfalls and vices of either the rich (*euporoi*) or the poor (*aporoi*). So, what is supposed to happen here, as suggested by the outline in *Politics* 4.2. (1289b15–17), a discussion of the regime “that is best for most people” and “the best practical political community” will transform into a discussion on the middling element and its necessity for the good governance of any regime. Thus, instead of an

¹ For the traditional and common understanding of this section, which is supposed to be a further elaboration of the regime that is commonly called ‘polity,’ see: Sidgwick, 1892; Mulgan, 1977, pp. 76–77, 102–15; Nichols, 1992, pp. 95–99; Bluhm, 1962; Johnson, 1988 and 2015, pp. 43–154; Simpson, 1998, pp. 327–35; Rubin, 2018; Diamond, 1978; Bondi, 2007; Stocker, Langtry, 1986. See Bates, 2003, pp. 102–121 for an argument against this view of not only translating “the *politeia* called *politeia*” but for the whole interpretation of “polity” as being Aristotle’s teaching about the best form of popular rule.

Regarding the choice to translate *politeia* as “regime” rather than constitution or political system, see Bates, 2014, pp. 142–43. Regarding the translation of Aristotle’s *Politics* that is given here. It is a significantly modified translation of Lord 2013, assisted by Newmann, 1902, IV; and Robinson, 1996 [1962].

account of a specific regime type, we get an account of what moderates and stabilizes regimes generally.

What we are told about *Politics* 4.11 by those who are the most authoritative interpreters and commentators on Aristotle and his *Politics* is that this chapter concerns the best regime in practice, as opposed to a discussion concerning the best regime in theory (which is presented in *Politics* 7 and 8).² Many commentators on this best regime in practice push a certain view of this regime—that it is the “regime called regime” that is first presented as a regime (*politeia*) type for the first time in *Politics* 3.7. (1279a39) in Aristotle’s six-fold typology of regimes. For there he argues that the rule of many for the common advantage “is called by the term common to all regimes, regime” (3.7.1279a38–39). Now this *politeia* called *politeia* is almost universally not translated by the term used to translate *politeia* generally (be it “regime,” “government,” or “constitution”) but as “polity.” But when one looks closely at the text, we see something different occurring. So, let us start by turning to the text of chapter 11 and see what Aristotle does in fact say. He opens this new chapter in the following way:

[W]hat regime is best (*aristos*) and what way of life is best for most (*pleistais*) polises and most human beings (*anthropon*), judging with a view neither to excellence (*arête*) of the sort that is beyond private persons, nor to education, in respect to those things requiring [special advantages provided by] nature and an equipment dependent on chance, nor to the regime that one would pray for, but a way of life which it is possible for most to share in, and a regime of which most polises can partake? (Aristotle’s *Politics*, 1295a25–30)

Now, this turn “to the best” is not meant to be a repeat of the question of “what regime is the best simply,” as raised in *Politics* 3, or to the account to be raised in the extended discussion of “the regime to be prayed for” of *Politics* 7 and 8. The “best” here is that which is “best” for most “communities” and most “human beings”. Aristotle says that we are to understand this best not in light of any super ordinary excellences but only those excellences one would find in the average human being. Nor from any education that is dependent on some special or extraordinary gifts of nature or gifts of chance, fortune, or good luck.³ Nor is the regime anything special either – it is not the regime “one would pray for” – that is, the regime that is possible only in theory or thought or wish. Rather, it is the “way of life” that most (*pleistais*) people and polises could share in and partake.

² There are scholars who make similar claims that either lean toward a more polity-centered perspective or engage in different analytical approaches. See Cherry, 2013 and 2009; Lockwood, 2006; and Ober 2013. The case developed here differs from theirs, as elaborated in this paper.

³ I speak of “gifts”, the text speaks of “equipment” (*choregia*). Now, *choregia* in Greek is the plural neutral in the nominative – the root word is *choregos*, which is a combination of the Greek words *choros* (chorus) and *hegeisthai* (to lead). Literally, *choregos* translates literally to “that which is necessary to lead a chorus” – and applies to one who could make it possible for a chorus – which is essential to the religious life of the Ancient Greeks and the means of commonly worshiping the gods, which joins people into a community (*koinonia*). Thus, the term means, and as according to Aristotle’s use of it, points to having the things – understood as resources (goods and materials) – that are necessary to support the common life of a community. So, such things are the goods necessary for living a life in common. And since they are to be given to the community for common use or for the sake of the community, such could be called a gift.

So, here in chapter 11 of book 4, we are told by renowned scholars of Aristotle and his *Politics* that it is about the best regime in practice, not in theory. However, the introduction of chapter 11, as previously quoted, does not seem to suggest any such thing. When one looks closely at the text – we notice something different occurring – for Aristotle says he will give us an account of the regime that is best for most people and most polises (1295a25–26).

Notice here Aristotle speaks about the *pleistais*, which can mean “most,” but it can also mean the “greatest” or “largest.” The most people and most polises being spoken of here means the greatest number or the largest selection among them. Thus, the “way of life” fostered by the regime can be suitable for the greatest number of people and is the most viable for the largest number of political communities. So, the view of what is best here must firmly be understood in terms of what we are able (or can) find among the largest amount of people and of communities.

So, the regime Aristotle mentions here is not the “best” in theory, but rather in the realm of the possible, of actual experience. And regarding how regimes are actually experienced – following on from what he presented over the previous ten chapters in *Politics* 4 – in the next sentence, Aristotle appears to assert that two of the regimes that he spoke of now seem to be excluded. He says in the next sentence: “Regarding what is called aristocracy, about which we have already talked, and what is neighboring (or close) to what is called a regime (as we can speak of both these as one) falls outside of most polises” (1295a31–34). This statement points to what he discussed earlier about “what is called aristocracy” and “what is called regime” in *Politics* 4, chapters 7, 8, and 9. Both of these (“what is called aristocracy” and “what is called regime”) fall outside what are most – the greatest variety (or number) – of polises. But the passage at 1295a31–34, also suggests that both “what is called aristocracy” and “what is called regime” can actually be spoken of as being the same thing. So, what is thought to be two separate forms of regimes are, in truth, one form of regime. So here Aristotle seems to suggest that the discussion of both so-called aristocracy⁴ and the so-called regime called regime are perhaps to be excluded in consideration as the kind of regimes that occur in practice among actual political communities (see Rubin, 2018; Davis, 1996, pp. 121–37).

Also, another feature of the dominant scholarly opinion regarding this chapter is that it is fundamentally tied to the so-called mixed-regime view of the so-called polity. We are told that here in chapter 11, we see that the best regime in practice is to be understood as the so-called polity, the mixed regime, and the passage we have dealt with is often used as proof of such a connection. But often such proof serves as the translation of the 1295a31–34 passage. All too many English translators who support the so-called polity/mixed regime interpretation of the regime translate polity for *politeia*, and do so by translating what is in fact an interpretation of what is being said. To be sure, all translations are to some extent interpretations, but this is also done by translators who promise to offer literal and faithful translations from the Greek (see Lord, 2013; also see Simpson, 1997).

⁴ It is worth recalling the ambiguity in the term aristocracy. In the Greek, it means “best ruled one” and thus seems to have a double meaning of either “the ones ruled by the best (or rule of the best-born)” or “the ones ruled best.” For another account of aristocracy, see Bates, 2003, pp. 97–101, in contrast to Lord, 1982; Chuska, 2000; Nichols, 1992, pp. 125–68; Kraut, 1997, 2002; Davis, 1996, pp. 121–17.

Now, the problem with seeing this chapter as dealing with the regime of the so-called polity/mixed regime (as many interpreters of Aristotle call the “regime called regime”) is that it is starting a whole new issue under consideration in Book 4 – the question of what regime is best for most people and most political communities – and not a continuation of the discussion of the regime called regime dealt with in *Politics* 4, chapters 7 through 9. The fact that the examination of both the regime called regime and aristocracy is so blurred in the discussion of those chapters and that he transitions in chapter 10 to discuss tyranny, should be enough to separate this chapter from being included as part of a discussion of the so-called mixed regime. Thus, I argue that this chapter ought not to be seen as a continuation of the discussion of the regime called regime, but rather that it focuses on the regime that is best for the most people and political communities.

The regime that is best for most

Now, returning to the question regarding what regime is best in practice for most people and for most polises, Aristotle says that “[j]udgement in all these matters rest on the same elements” (1295b35). As to what those elements are, he continues:

If it was correctly said in the discourses on ethics that the happy life is one in accordance with excellence (*arête*) and unimpeded, and that excellence (*arête*) is a mean, then the middling sort of life is best – the mean that is capable of being attained by each sort of individual” (1295a35-40).

Thus, he seems to point to the model of excellence (*arête*) from the *Nicomachean Ethics* to address what is needed here to achieve arriving at the regime that is best. Let us look at the *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle says the following on this point:

What, then, prevents one from calling happy (*eudomonia*) someone who is active in accord with complete excellence (*arête*) and who is adequately equipped with external goods, not for any chance time but in a complete life? Or must one posit in addition that he will both live in this way and meet his end accordingly – since the future is immanifest to us, and we posit happiness, wholly and in every way, as an end and as complete? (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1.10.1101a15–19).

In *Ethics*, there is no mention that a “middling sort of life is best.” This is to say that the excellence (.) as implied in *Nicomachean Ethics* is not a claim that excellence is an average or middling point, but rather an extreme point between an excess and a defect. Here in *Politics* 4.11, Aristotle seems to suggest that the excellence (*arête*) that allows one to get the regime that is best for most men and most polises is a middle point or averaging out. Hence, there is a major discrepancy between what he speaks about as excellence (*arête*) in the *Ethics* and in the *Politics*. Perhaps this is because in politics excellence (*arête*) political-ly understood is to be seen in light of the particular claim that the regime makes.

Political speaking, political excellence (*arête*) is relative to the given regime. Hence, the whole question of the tension between the excellent citizen versus the excellent human being – as these are said in *Politics* 3 to be only conjoining as one in the best regime, otherwise the excellence (or virtuous) human being might be a bad citizen. Think about the good Nazi, surely the ‘good’ citizen in Nazi Germany, would not only be a horrible

citizen in Democratic England or America – but also unlikely able also to be a good human being.

Returning to the text of *Politics* 4.11, Aristotle continues by noting: “These same defining principles must also define excellence (*arête*) and baseness or vice (*kakia*) in the case of a city and a regime; for the regime is the way of life of a polis” (1295a40–b1). Here, Aristotle repeats his teaching that the regime (*politeia*) is the “way of life” – what we today would consider not only the political form and institutions of the political community, but also what we would call its “political culture.” And thus, “the way of life” deals with what the political community thinks about the just and the unjust, as well as the core opinions that hold the political community together as a community.

Today, we would talk about such things as the regime’s values – that is to say, the things that it values and holds to be the most important in the regime’s understanding of itself. Since regimes are an aggregation of persons who compose it, what we are ultimately talking about is what those who have authority in that community and give shape to that community hold to be both the most true and false things that they believe to be central and fundamental for the political community to be able to not only hold together and survive but also to live together in what they view as a beautiful (*kalon*) manner. This very much connects this chapter with what Aristotle teaches in *Politics* 3 about the end of the polis – the political community – that it is not about merely living (i.e., merely surviving) but living well (see *Politics* 3.8.1280a31–34).⁵

The middling sort and political communities and their regimes

After Aristotle dealt with the issue of excellence (*arête*) and happiness (*eudemonia*), he shifted his focus toward the other parts that exist within a polis (or the political community – if one wishes to go beyond the frame of the polis of the Ancients). He notes, “Now in all cities there are three parts of the city, the very well off, the very poor, and third, those in the middle between these” (1295b1–3). Here, Aristotle refers to the very well off (*eu-poroi*), the very poor (*a-poroi*), and the middle class, which have the sufficient means (*poroi*) to avoid poverty, but don’t have excessive wealth or a superabundance of means (*poroi*).

Earlier in *Politics* 4.4, Aristotle examined the parts of the political community, where he not only talked about the poor and the wealthy, but also between the multitude (*hos plethos*) and the notables (*hoi gnorimoi*), and other units that give shape to the political community (*Politics* 4.4.1290a30–1291b10).⁶ Here, the only thing Aristotle seems to add

⁵ On another case where the end of living well is more explicitly tied to the question of “happiness,” see *Politics* 7.13, where Aristotle examines the best regime, which is the regime “one would pray for.” See Salkever, 2007.

⁶ Regarding the issue of the multitude and its import on the question of the regime and that it best achieves stable and decent rule, see the debate between Cammack, 2013 and Cherry, 2013. Cammack, 2013 makes the hard case for the virtue of the multitude and the democratic regime, whereas Cherry 2013, expanding on what he argued in Cherry, 2009, takes up the case of the polity and the question of political participation. While there is much merit to what Cherry (both in 2009 and 2013) argues, Cammack, 2013 ultimately has a better case from what is evidenced in the evidence of *Politics* 3 (see Bates, 2003, pp. 122–53; Ober, 2013; Waldon, 1995).

that was not explicitly present in the treatment at 4.4 is the idea of the middling sort, what today's social science literature would speak of as the middle class.

Continuing on this treatment of the middling sort, Aristotle notes:

For it is readiest to obey reason, while for one who is overly handsome, overly strong, overly well born, or overly wealthy – or the reverse of these things, overly indigent, overly weak, or very lacking in honor – it is difficult to follow reason. The former sort tends [i.e., the wealthy or the notables] to become arrogant and base on a grand scale, the latter [i.e., the very poor (*aporoí*)] malicious and base in petty ways; and acts of injustice are committed either through arrogance or through malice. Moreover, these [i.e., the very rich and the very poor] are least inclined either to avoid ruling or to wish to rule, both of which things are injurious to polises (1295b5–14).

Thus, the middle class avoids the extremes found in the very well off and the very poor that cause problems and prevent a regime from being well run. The extreme of wealth and poverty produce forms of malice and arrogance that threaten the order of the governance of the political community.

Aristotle then focuses on the extremes and how they impact the rule and ruling of a political community, turning to each a bit more in detail. He speaks about the wealthy or the well off as “those who are preeminent in the goods of fortune – strength, wealth, friends, and the other things of this sort – neither wish to be ruled nor know how to be” (1296b14–16). He continues regarding this group by noting that “[t]his is something that marks them from the time they are children at home, for the effect of living in luxury is that they do not become habituated to being ruled even at school” (1296b16–17). Thus, the wealthy seem not to know how to limit themselves within the political community. In that their greatness in wealth causes them to believe they are great in other things as well. Such an opinion of themselves leads to a feeling of preeminence towards their poorer and less well-endowed fellow inhabitants within their political community (that is to say those with less means than the very wealthy). Thus, the very well off not only tend to look down on them, but also see themselves as superior to them and to hold the presupposition (*hupothesis*), justifying their right to master the less well off, or to ignore them if they are not ruling.

As to the very poor, Aristotle notes that “those who are excessively needy with respect to these things are too humble” (1296b16–18). They are both too humble and lack the ability to put themselves forward in the community, and at the same time collectively act arrogantly and with malice towards those whom they envy. And Aristotle again contrasts the two by saying, “[s]o the ones do not know how to rule but only how to be ruled, and then only to be ruled like a slave, and the others do not know how to be ruled by any sort of rule, but only to rule like a master” (1296b18–21). But when he says this, who is who? In the former part of this passage, Aristotle seems to refer to the very poor, and the latter the very well off.

Thus, not only do the very poor not know how to rule, but moreover, they only know how to be ruled as a slave is ruled – through obedience and submission. Whereas the well-off do not know how to be ruled – they cannot abide by it – and when they are ruling, they rule as a master (*despotes*), one ruling over slaves. So, when a political community is composed of only such groups, such a political community, he says, “then,

is a city not of free persons but of slaves and masters, the ones consumed by envy, the others by contempt” (1296b21–23). Therefore, in such a political community – the poor envy the well off, and the well-off have contempt for the poor and the community per se is unfit for free people.

Fellowship and the political community

A political community suitable for a free person is one where there is fellowship and shared good feelings for each other. Such a community is where the ruled see the rulers as ruling for the interest of all and not only the ruler’s interests – and so there is not that much need for coercion for the ruled to obey. On this point, Aristotle notes that, “[n]othing is further removed from affection and from a political community; for community involves the element of affection – enemies do not wish to have even a journey in common” (1296b23–25).

This discussion points to the need for affection for a political community and very much calls attention to the discussion in the *Nicomachean Ethics* on the need for friendship (*philia*) for a healthy political community. Here, Aristotle notes:

It seems too that friendship holds polises together and that lawgivers are more serious about it than about justice. For like-mindedness seems to resemble friendship, and lawgivers aim at this especially and drive out discord because it especially produces hatred. When people are friends, they have no need of justice, but when they are just, they do need friendship in addition; and in the realm of the just things, the most just seems to be what involves friendship. (*Nicomachean Ethics* 8.1 1155a23–29).⁷

Now, friendship, or this fellow-feeling based on shared citizenship, or sharing in the life together in a political community, seems to be fundamental for holding political communities together. As much as justice, which aims at equity and fairness in how the rule occurs with the community, friendship likewise frames bonds of trust and a willingness to obey; without fellow-feeling undergirding a community, its stable perpetuation is rather unlikely. Therefore, the attempt by modern political thought to replace both justice and fellow-feeling with the concept of consent insufficiently addresses the necessary condition by which the ruled come to be content and accepting of those who rule in that given political community.

With friendship, in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle states that there is “no need of justice” because fellow-feeling ensures good treatment and beneficial concern and benefit towards friends. But he then notes that where there is justice, there remains, among those in such relations, “a want or desire to have friendship.” Now, the need for friendship arises out of the social nature of man and out of the fact that human community is founded in nature – and not something that humans create in order to either escape nature or overcome it.

⁷ For the larger discussion of political friendship in Aristotle, see *Nicomachean Ethics* 8, chapters 9 and 10. For work dealing with political friendship in Aristotle’s political thought, see Yack, 1993, pp. 109–128; also see Kronman, 1979.

The Political Community and those who compose it

Now, after dealing with the question of friendship as a means to unite the political community as a shared community, Aristotle turns next to the benefit of the political community being made of relative equal sorts. He says that the political community “wishes, at any rate, to be made up of equal and similar persons to the extent possible, and this is most particularly the case with the middling elements” (1295b25–27). He thus seems to point to the need of a well-governed political community to consist of harmony and order, which thus needs to be composed of people as equal and/or as similar to each other as possible. Regarding what sort they should be equal or similar, he clearly suggests they ought to be of the middling element.

I will suggest that one of the major factors that led many twentieth century Anglo-American political theorists reading Aristotle’s *Politics* 4.11 to argue for the middle-class regime is the very powerful argument by the American sociologist Sidney Martin Lipset regarding the role that his definition of the “middle class” played in ensuring stable political development for democratic states. In Lipset’s argument, without a healthy, strong, and sizable middle class, the prospects for successful democratic development were unlikely.⁸ His argument was so powerful that it is all too often taken as a truism in most theories of political development. Lipset’s teaching on the middle class and its role in making democratic governance possible is often seen as merely a contemporary correction to what interpreters of Aristotle believe he is arguing for in *Politics* 4.11.

I argue that Lipset’s teaching regarding the role of the middle class is all too often imposed upon modern attempts to understand what Aristotle is doing in *Politics* 4.11 with his discussion of the middling sort (*meso*).⁹ This is because Lipset’s specific understanding of the middle class consists of an urban, professional, university-educated, “bourgeois” sort of multitude, whereas Aristotle’s view of the middling sort (*meso*) is much broader and does not demand the focus on urbanization, education, or professional character. Compare Aristotle’s explicit assertion that the framing and herding multitude as superior to the commercial and urban ones (see *Politics* 6.4.318b7-1319b32).

Returning to Aristotle’s text, we see him develop this line of thought (regarding the role of the middling sort) as he notes that the political community “must necessarily be governed in the best fashion if it is made up of the elements out of which we assert the polis is by nature constituted” (1295b27–29). Here, Aristotle points to the argument he makes both in book 1, chapter 2 of *Politics* – that the *polis* (the political community) is by nature – that such a political community ought to be composed of so vast a middling element. Thus, political communities composed of such a significant size of the middle class, Aristotle says, are the political communities, and in it are these kinds of citizens who “most particularly preserve themselves” (1295b29–30). And by preserving themselves, they preserve the regime they are citizens of (in that to be a citizen is not to be a mere subject, but one who shares in the rules of the regime). They are such a good citizen because:

⁸ See Lipset, 1959, also Lipset, 1994 for an updated assessment. Also see Easterly, 2001, and Fukuyama, 2011. Compare Rubin, 2018.

⁹ Compare Rubin, 2018; Johnson, 1988; Adamovsky, 2005; Bluhm, 1962; Coby, 1988, Cherry, 2009; Mulgan, 1977, pp. 76–77, 102–115; Nichols, 1992, pp. 95–99.

For neither do they desire the things of others, as the poor do, nor others their things, as the poor desire those of the wealthy; and as a result of not being plotted against or plotting against others they pass their time free from danger. On this account, the prayer of Phocylides was a beautiful (*kalon*) one: “Many things are best for the middling; I would be of the middling sort in the polis” (1295b30–34).

The middling sort and regimes

In the next paragraph, Aristotle continues the discussion of the role of the middle class and the regime that is best for most people and most political communities. He states,

It is clear, therefore, that the political community that depends on the middling sort is best as well, and that those polises are capable of being well governed in which the middling element is numerous – most particularly if it is superior to both of the other parts, but if not, superior to either of them; for when added to one it will tip the scale and prevent the opposing excesses from arising (1295b35–40).

Aristotle says here that the presence of a sizable “middling element” allows for political communities to be “well governed,” if and only if the other parts – that is to say the very rich and the very poor – be not “superior to either of them.” The middling element – or as we would call them the middle class – provide the balance needed to keep the extremes of “the very rich” or “the very poor,” or, to “tip the scale,” to prevent the regime in question tilting towards excesses. Thus, the middle class prevents excesses from arising that threaten the stability and good order of the political community.

In the next sentence, Aristotle places an emphasis upon the good fortune of “those engaged in politics” – what we would either call politicians or statesmen – in having not only a sizable middle class but also “sufficient property” (1295b40–1296a1). This is good fortune, Aristotle says, “because where some possess very many things and others nothing, either rule of the people in its extreme form must come into being, or unmixed oligarchy, or – as a result of both of these excesses – tyranny” (1296a1–4). Their extremity, either very poor’s envy and weakness or the very rich’s arrogance and haughtiness, as was said, pushes the given regime towards extremes that lead to its increasingly despotic character. Thus, the excess in the inclination of each of the extreme groups towards being ruled and ruling (which is the nature of a citizen in a free city) pushes regimes towards ever-increasing despotic directions.¹⁰

He expands on this aforementioned point when he notes, “For tyranny arises from the most headstrong sort of democracy and from oligarchy, but much less often from the middling sorts of regime and those close to them” (1296a4–6). Here, he is pointing to the tendency – in the most extreme form of democracy – the last democracy, which he addresses both in *Politics* 4.4 and 4.6 – where demagogues arise by flattering the many poor who rule the regime. This happens in a regime where the many are poor, who want

¹⁰ Compare what is presented above to both Cammack, 2013 and Ober, 2013, both of whom argue a position similar yet different to the one that is being advanced here; then contrast what is being argued here to Lockwood, 2006 and Cherry, 2013, who strongly push for the so-called “polity” view.

and desire (that is, they desire to do as they will) to not be ruled or restrained by law, yet the political leaders (*demagogue*) get them to do as they wish, and if they can master them so that they give them power, their rule increasingly becomes more like a tyranny. As for the very well off, and when they rule without restraint of the law and can do as they will – such a regime was addressed *Politics* 4.5 and 4.6. – then the four forms of oligarchy thus arise – the dynastic oligarchy without law.

So, a regime with a sizable middle class and with sufficient property can avoid the move toward those more extreme regime forms. But as to how specifically this movement towards these regimes will happen is not to be discussed here, but elsewhere in “the discourses (*logoi*) on revolutions in regimes” in *Politics* 5 (1296a6–7). If we look at what he says about this issue, we find he says that “it is on this account that tyrannies arise in oligarchies and democracies. For those who aim at tyranny in either regime are either the greatest persons – the popular leaders in the one, the powerful in the other – or those who hold the greatest offices, when they rule for a long time” (5.8.1308a19–24). Thus, to avoid that imbalance within the political community, here, in *Politics* 4.11, Aristotle points to the role of the middle class and sufficient property holding by the largest part of the community (see Rubin, 2018; contrast to Lockwood, 2006). The logic of that situation only works when the middle class is dominant in the regime over both the very rich and the very poor.

Now turning toward the character of “the middling sort” (or as we would call it – the middle class) itself, Aristotle notes that the middling sort “is best is evident” – that is to say, it is obvious to those who are observing the effects of their role within regimes (1296a7). But is it really so evident as he claims? Why haven’t others followed suit? Aristotle does not address this but merely makes this claim and moves on.

Aristotle continues his account of the middling sort by noting that “[i]t alone is without factional conflict, for where the middling element is numerous, factional conflicts and splits over the regimes occur least of all” (1296a8–9). But then again, is what he says here really true about the middling sort? Marxists and those who are influenced by Marx’s teaching suggest the middling element – or the middle class – are the tools of the rich against the worker – and the existence of such class divisions are the cause of faction. And in *Politics* 5.1–5.3, Aristotle would agree with him, although not completely. Now the reason why Aristotle says that the middling sort are without factional conflict is that since they have enough, they are not necessarily in envy of the very rich’s wealth. And since they are stronger in the regime and hold control of the regime, they are inclined to act with less arrogance and contempt towards the very poor. What is more, perhaps their rule, which requires that most have access to sufficient property to maintain their situation, offers the poor an opportunity to move into the middling sort – in ways the arrogance of the rich might not allow.

In returning to *Politics* 4.11, Aristotle turns to the sizes of various political communities and their impact on the role the middle class can play in providing a balance to the political character of a given community. On why “large polises are freer of factional conflict,” it is likewise because they have a sizeable middle class (1296a9–10). Whereas, Aristotle says, “[i]n small cities it is easier for all to be separated into two factions and have no one left in the middle, and nearly everyone is either poor or well off” (1296a10–13). So, in small political communities – the size of it – and perhaps the resources it has

available to it (such as land), leads to the swift division between those who have some and those who do not, which is the basis of those who are rich and those who are poor (the Greek term for poor literally means “to be without means”).

From addressing the question of the relative size of a political community and the likelihood of having a middling class present or even possible, he then raises how the different regimes would relate to them. He writes:

And democracies are more stable than oligarchies and more durable on account of those of the middling sort, who are more numerous and have a greater part in the prerogatives in democracies than in oligarchies. When the poor predominate numerically in the absence of these, they fare badly and are quickly ruined (1296a13–16).

So, again, he points out how the extremes of wealth and poverty lead to extremes in their ruling style of such classes when they are predominating in the regime. Democracies are said to be more stable than oligarchies because it is in the former that the middle class has a greater opportunity to share in the offices than the latter allows.

Therefore, it is in democracies where the middle sort plays a more significant role than the very poor, that such regimes are said to be more stable than oligarchies. When the poor predominate instead of the middle class, those who have wealth are targeted by the regime and start to feel the mastery of the poor over them. Then, the poor will despoil their wealth, and with its loss, become poor themselves. Now the middle class gives to democracies a moderateness to the regime’s rule that the poor cannot give.

The middling sort’s temperament

Given this focus on the temperament of the different classes in regard to ruling, Aristotle makes a very interesting point about the class background of certain famous lawgivers of Antiquity. He says, “It should be considered an indication of this that the best legislators are from the middling citizens. Solon was one of these, as is clear from his poems, and Lycurgus (for he was not king), Charondas, and most of the others” (1296a18–22).

So, there is something inherent in the character development of individuals from the middling sort that seems to provide an education in moderation, which neither the very wealthy nor the very poor can access. And because of this, the middle class seems to be a breeding ground for capable potential lawgivers (or founders of regimes and/or new political communities) or statesmen or political actors/politicians who exercise day to day governance of a political community. Thus, it seems the environment that allows for political greatness is hinted to be the found in the pool from which the middling sort exists.

After this aside about the moderate character of the middling element making possible the greatest legislators, he then suggests from what he said about the different character between the very rich, the very poor, and the middling element and the other points – from those things it is “evident” why “most regimes are either democratic or oligarchic” (1296a23–24). These regimes predominate because of “the fact that the middling element is often few in them, whichever is preeminent, whether those owning property or the *demos* oversteps the middle [path] and conducts the regime to suit itself,

so that either rule of the people comes into being or an oligarchy” (1296a24–27).¹¹ So the reality of the political scene is that, in reality, either the rich or the poor tend to be the predominating element in most political communities.

Now, because this is so, he notes that due to “the factional conflicts and fights that arise between the *demos* and the well off, whichever of the two succeeds in dominating its opponents does not establish a regime that is common or equal, but they grasp for preeminence in the regime as the prize of victory” (1296a28–31). Thus, he says the factional conflict between the poor and the rich led to the desire for victory, not accommodation among the parties. And with victory arises not only predominance over the regime but also the ability to dominate the opposing faction.

Aristotle says this situation occurs because: “those who have achieved leadership in Greece have, in either case, looked to their own regime in establishing either democracies or oligarchies in cities, having in view not what is advantageous for the cities but rather what is advantageous for themselves” (1296a31–36). Aristotle seems to say that in the Greece of his time, there appears to be poverty in the statecraft of most of those leading the various political communities. And because of the preference for the partisan regime form they lead, there is little attempt to favor the rise of the middling sort in their political communities.

On the suitability of the times

He says, “for these reasons, the middling regime has either never arisen or has done so infrequently and in a few polises” (1296a36–37). Why is this so? Aristotle tells us: “For of those who have previously held leadership, one man alone was persuaded to provide for this sort of arrangement; and the custom is now established that those in the cities do not even want equality, but either seek to rule or endure being dominated” (1296a37–b1). Thus, the desire to dominate is not the right spirit to be effective ruling well. As to dominate is to seek mastery (*despotes*), not political rule, which seeks to rule over equals not over subordinates or slaves. So, Aristotle, speaking of his times, seems to be saying there was something defective about the modes of ruling, which treated politics as a form of mastery – and this is why regimes with despotic forms tended to predominate.

At the beginning of *Politics* 4.11, Aristotle promises to talk about the regime that is best for most people and most polises. What we get instead is an extended discussion of the middle class and their role in moderating regimes and making their rule both more moderate and more harmonious and why the current situation of Greece in Aristotle’s times seems to make that impossible. This is why there is no greater discussion of establishing it as a regime throughout the remainder of *Politics*.¹²

¹¹ Now, the *demos* are the common people, or the vulgar sort. In democracies, the *demos* were predominately the poor, those that had to work or labor (hence toil) for their substance. See Cammack, 2013; Waldon, 1995; and Bates, 2003, pp. 122–53.

¹² Although we will find extensive discussion regarding both democracy and oligarchy both in *Politics* 5 and 6, nowhere other than his talk here in *Politics* 4.11 does he add further about creating such a regime. And when one looks at the extended discussion of the regime “one would pray for” in *Politics*

If one searches the rest of the *Politics* for a further treatment of creating the middle-class regime, one searches in vain for it – as a prolonged discussion about the creation of such a regime it is simply not to be found. Why is this the case? Perhaps this is because such a regime is possible only where there are enough resources for it to be, and such conditions seem to point to the need for commerce – something that, on the surface of things, is not generally favored by Aristotle. Aristotle reaffirms that one does not find an abundance of regimes with large middle classes in the Greek cities at the time of his writing. Leo Paul deAlvarez notes this in Aristotle's treatment of the middle-class regime, and he although repeats Aristotle's finding, which we just noted, he points out that the creation and advocacy of this middle-class regime is far more explicitly advocated by modern political thinkers than by the Ancient Greeks or Romans.¹³

This suggests that the rise of middle class regime seems to be possible not from following the classical regime systems of the Ancients – with their emphasis on excellence or virtue (*arête*), but more out of the ideas of modern political thought of by Hobbes, Locke, and especially that of Montesquieu – with their emphasis on founding the political community on the basis not of excellence or virtue, but on commerce. Here, Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* appears to be the more fundamental teaching of the middle-class regime founded on the centrality of commerce than the regimes one sees typically in classical politics.

One reason why a middle-class regime is difficult to occur is, as Aristotle pointed out earlier, the likelihood of there being a sizable middle class is connected to the possibility of larger political communities. Factional conflict and the conflict among polises arises because the differences within regimes lead to disputes and conflicts arising from disagreements about justice and right action by the political communities. Also, another important difference is that size would be limited when we look at the reality of ancient politics with its focus on the polis as the embodiment of the political community, given that the *polis* as a political community was very much limited in size. This limit is founded on the limit human beings see themselves as being members of one shared community, which would not only allow every citizen to meet every other citizen, but also to be able to communicate and deliberate together effectively. With an overly large number of citizens, enabling the participation of all in deliberation simply leads to either partial deliberation by some, who do it effectively, and others, who blindly follow, or cannot or can't be bothered to try. So, when the polis grew too big, or too large, its governability started to break down. Hence, in *Politics* 3, Aristotle makes it very clear that the polis had limits to its territory for it to remain a polis. This was why he remarked that Babylon could not be understood to be a polis (3.3.1276a25–34).

7 and 8, no mention of the middle class is to be found there (see Salkever, 2007; in contrast to Simpson, 1998, pp. 195–251). Rather, that regime rests so much on slavery that what is ordinarily done by the freeborn common multitudes in most polises is there done by slaves. Again, this was done so all citizens of the regime can have the necessary leisure needed to be able to pursue an education for excellence and philosophy. Compare Rubin, 2018 and Lockwood, 2006.

¹³ One sees from Locke's *Second Treatise* onward among those whom advance a classical liberal view defend the establishment of the middle-class regime. See Montesquieu, 1989 and Tocqueville, 2000 for clear arguments about the creation of middle-class regimes. See de Alvarez, 1988, pp. 255–58. In contrast, see Rubin, 2018.

Yet, it is with the rise of commerce that larger political communities become more possible. That Athens and Carthage could be large *polises* was due to their emphasis on commerce. Thus, commerce provides the wealth necessary to become both extremely oligarchic (see *Politics* 4.5 and 4.6) and extremely democratic (see the last democracy in *Politics* 4.4, 4.5, and 6.4.), as well as the possibility of the large middling sort. In fact, as we noted, when one looks at the classical regimes, the existence of a polis ruled by the middling element is very difficult to find.

Montesquieu points out that the republics of ancient polis were limited because of the need to protect themselves from their enemies. The ability to protect themselves was made possible when those who lived together were willing to fight together to preserve the *polis*. If they did not fight together as one, the polis would fall – and hence the need for virtue, Montesquieu says. But their need for such close bonds so that they would form a brotherhood willing to die for each other would indeed have limits in regard to the size of such fellowships before the bond between them would start to break down.

Wrapping thing up

As we turn to the last few sentences of chapter 4, following on from where we left off at 1296b1, Aristotle says, “What the best regime is, then, and for what reason, is evident from these things” (1296b2–3). Huh? It is? Again, we have an assertion that given what he has said above, the answer to the question of “what best regime is” and “reason why it is best” is plain for all to see. But if one reflects carefully over what we have been looking at in this chapter, there has been very little discussion of any one regime that is best. Rather, what we – the readers – get from the text is a discussion not of a regime but of one class or element – or sort of persons – that a political community is composed of. That is, we get a prolonged discussion not of a regime but a class of people – “the middling sort.”

Thus, here in *Politics* 4.11, in lieu of a discussion about the regime that is best for most people and most polises, we get a rather prolonged discussion of the middling sort – or what we today would call the middle class – and the role it plays in moderating the regimes of political communities. So, we get a bait and switch – a promised discussion of the best regime in practice, but instead we get a sociology lesson.

In the next sentence – perhaps in an attempt to elaborate on what should be obvious to us readers – he says, “[a]s for the other regimes (since we assert that there are several types of democracies and oligarchies), once the best is defined it is not difficult to see which is to be regarded as first, which second, and so on in the same manner according to whether it is better or worse” (1296b3–7). Now, here he seems to be pointing to the question of which of the sub-regimes are best. But again, when we look at it what was said in the text, we would have to say that the democratic regime generally turned out best, and of the varieties of democratic regimes, the earlier one rather than the last – because there, that regime is clearly in the hands of the many poor, and that regime, given its despotic character, is clearly one where the partisan character of the rule would surely exclude the possibility of a sizable middle class.

As for the other regimes, he seems to give enough statements throughout chapter 11 or one to eliminate them from the running of being the best regime, given how the various ways their rule makes the rise of the middling element unlikely. Oligarchy, and all its variations, can be ruled out – so too with tyranny – as again being too despotic in character to allow the rise of a middling element to come to hold the ruling offices of the regime. As for aristocracies and the regime called regime, there is no further mention after their mention in 4.11 (1295a32–34).

In the next sentence, again Aristotle appears to attempt to clarify what regime made the cut for being best – and why. He says, “the one [the regime] that is closest to this must of necessity always be better, the one that is more removed from the middle, worse, provided one is not judging with a view to a presupposition (*hypothesis*)” (1296b 5–10). This is a very esoteric passage – vague, and more akin an abstract aphorism or riddle than an explicit and clear example or explanation. In this passage, the point of reference of the “this” [the indefinite article], as in “the one that is closest to *this*,” does not refer to the best regime, but instead points to the “middling sort” or the “middle class,” with the remainder of the passage playing on the term “middle”. In fact, the playfulness of the use of “middle” so puts the middling sort to our mind – that one thinks “he can’t be referring to that.” This is why many interpreters of this passage will once again point to the so-called regime called regime as being referenced. But that is not the case. What is being referred to as the means to measure what regime is the best is the degree that it is possible for the regime to allow a sizable middle class.

What is also interesting in this passage, aside from the playfulness of the use of “middle,” is what he says about the need not to judge things here with reference to the “presupposition” (*hypothesis*). Now, when he has spoken about “presupposition” (*hypothesis*) in reference to regimes, it usually is tied to the claim that the regime advances to justify itself and why it is ruling and better than other regimes. Thus, “presupposition” (*hypothesis*) is the regime claim about the just and the best way of life. And we see here that the claim made by each regime about its way of life is given little attention here in *Politics* 4.11. Rather, what is paid attention to here in 4.11 is the presence of a sizable middling sort in the political community and that group being the one connected to the ruling offices of the regime.

In the last sentence, Aristotle seeks to clarify the issue of what he means by “with a view to a presupposition” – by saying about that expression: “I say ‘with a view to a presupposition’ because many times one sort of regime is more choiceworthy, there is nothing to prevent another regime being more advantageous (*sumpheron*) to some” (1296b10–12). Again, he seems to say that the “presupposition” of a regime is not that helpful here regarding the best. This is due to the fact that what may appear to be the most “choiceworthy” claim on the surface of things may not actually be what brings advantage or benefit (*sumpheron*) to one community nor benefit to others.

Yet, one must consider how the choiceworthiness of one regime, when considered at the surface-level notion of what is best, aligns with the fact that one regime will benefit one community, and thus be advantageous for that community, but not so for another community. Now, this might be that the matter and what a community is composed of – that is to say, the discrete groups and classes that are found in a given community – may take advantage of or benefit from one type of regime more so than other. And likewise, one type

of regime might cause more harm than another to those whom the political community is composed of. So, the matter out of which the political community is here to play a role in being able to judge what regime is beneficial to what people or community.

What is more, regarding the last two sentences here, Aristotle says that it is worse to deviate from the middle “provided one is not judging with a view to a presupposition” (1296b6–12). Now the lack of judgment regarding the presupposition (*hypothesis*) seems to allow the middle analogy to work. This permits the possibility of the argument for the regime with the large middling sort, who would hold most, if not all, of the ruling offices in that regime, and those that move from the middle to the extremes of either very wealthy or the very poor ruling turn out to the worse. Here, the best is got at by not appealing to the presupposition (*hypothesis*) that underlies the regime but to the makeup of those who inhabit or compose the given political community.

Now, the presupposition is very much the claim or “qualifying condition” that one makes to justify things. In an investigation, it is the claim one is going to test or evaluate. In talking about regimes (*politeias*), it is the claim that the regime makes to justify itself and its ruling. The presupposition of a regime concerns the claims and assertions regarding why their rule is best. And thus, the presupposition of a regime would very much be about the things that those who form the regime hold most dear or fundamental to the very nature of the regime itself (e.g., who is rightly a citizen, what is justice and/or injustice, why ought we rule over others, etc.). So, the suggestion here at 4.11.1296b8–11, is that in looking at the question of what regime is best for most people and most political communities – the claim of the regime – that is, its justification for itself or the reasons why it should rule rather than others, should not be used to judge this matter of what regime is best for what people or communities.

Thus, the next sentence – the last of the chapter – whose purpose is to clarify the meaning of not judging “with a view to the presupposition,” instead seems to point to the fact that there is a difference between the “choiceworthy” on the basis of the claim a regime makes – in that we often make choices in terms of the various claims and assertions and judge which one approximates as closely as possible, if not hitting on the best simply – and what is advantageous or beneficial (*sumpheron*) to the people and community (or even the regime). The point on the distinction between the “choiceworthy” and the “advantageous” is that not every regime will be advantageous (*sumpheron*) to every political community or the people who constitute it. The suggestion is what may be advantageous or beneficial (*sumpheron*) for one community might not be for another. Also, what might benefit one might harm another. And what is harmful to one must be advantageous or beneficial to a different one. This is because the peoples who compose each political community can, and in many cases do, differ from one another. And the people who inhabit the given political community in terms of their character and makeup seem to play a role in what will be beneficial or advantageous (as well as harmful and disadvantageous) to them as a community. Among different political communities, there are differences in the character of each. Therefore, the things that are beneficial and harmful to each community will likewise differ. We conclude by highlighting the differences among those who constitute and make up – the matter (*hyle*) of – the given political communities. These differences consequently impact the question regarding the most suitable regime for each community. With this thought ends *Politics* 4.11.

Furthermore, it is important to consider the introduction of *Politics* 4 at the end of chapter 2, where we were informed that our objective was to identify the best regime for the majority of people and communities, instead of a discussion of regimes per se. Bearing this in mind, we discussed the components of communities and focused on them, particularly the middling sort. And with the discussion of the middling sort, we thus determined how one group or element can play a key role in collectively harmonizing communities. And in doing so, we can identify how regimes need to be moderated to achieve best governance. However, that point is made questionable by the revelation that the middle class might not always be possible everywhere, and even if it would be better for there to be one, one still must address what regime suits what particular community.

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Zagadka środka: kwestionowanie interpretacji mieszanego lub średniego reżimu w polityce Arystotelesa

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł kwestionuje argument, że reżim klasy średniej jest ucieleśnieniem reżimu mieszanego i jest przedstawiany jako najlepszy reżim w praktyce lub najlepszy reżim w większości miast. Zamiast opisu najlepszego praktycznego reżimu, to znaczy konkretnej formy reżimu, Arystoteles przedstawia opis tego, w jaki sposób reżimy mogą osiągnąć umiarkowanie i harmonię – to znaczy stabilność poprzez zapewnienie roli mezo, środka, który znajduje się pomiędzy bogatymi i biednymi. Arystoteles w swoim opisie tego środka i jego wyższości nad bogatymi i biednymi, poruszamy się po znaczeniu tego, czym naprawdę jest element środkowy. Tak więc zamiast opisu konkretnego typu reżimu otrzymujemy opis tego, co ogólnie rzecz biorąc łągodzi i stabilizuje reżimy.

Słowa kluczowe: Polityka Arystotelesa, ustrój polityczny, klasa średnia, reżim klasy średniej, reżim mieszany

