

Oligarchy in Ancient Greece

The tripartite division of constitutions into monarchy, oligarchy, and democracy – a standard feature of Greek thought by the fifth century (Hdt. 3.80–2) – is deceptively simple. Problems with the schema, especially in the distinction between oligarchy and democracy, go back to the ancient Greeks themselves. An oligarch during the revolution of 411 B.C. in Athens attempted to fob off oligarchy as just a different kind of democracy (Thuc. 8.5.3; Ostwald 2000: 26), and in the following century Isocrates argued that Sparta was a democracy (Isoc. 7.61; see also Lintott 2000). This problem had evidently not been solved by the end of the Classical Period, when Aristotle could describe the same constitution of Syracuse (the democracy of the fifth century) alternatively as a democracy and an aristocracy in different passages of the same work (the *Politics*; see Rutter 2000). Modern scholars also have pointed out how “slippery” these terms can be (e.g. Brock 2000, introduction). There are fixed points: no one disputes that classical Athens was a democracy, nor that Thebes was an oligarchy, but many constitutional forms lie in a gray haze, and there has been relatively little systematic discussion of anything other than democracy and tyranny in recent years. A reappraisal of the taxonomy of oligarchy is warranted.

This paper argues that the true definition of ὀλιγαρχία lies in a particular relationship between “rulers” (ἄρχοντες) and the wider community. This word (*archon*) is traditionally rendered into English, “magistrate,” but this translation has the unfortunate semantic baggage that it implicitly excludes members of deliberative bodies. In Greek political vocabulary, anybody serving in office was considered an *archon*. In Athens, for example, members of the Council of 500 were just as much *archontes* as the public auctioneers (*poletai*) the Nine Archons. Oligarchies typically were typically characterized by a power structure in which magistrates and

councils were sovereign and effectively prevented citizen assemblies from exercising real power. In other words, the “rulers” (*archontes*) were exactly that.

This definition cuts through the unnecessary baggage bequeathed to political theorists by Aristotle, whose treatment (in the *Politics*) of “oligarchic” institutions is at the root of many of the misconceptions about oligarchy. The avalanche of particular institutional features and practices that the treatise discusses gives the impression that individual features of a constitution can be labeled as either oligarchic or democratic without reference to the rest of the working of the political system. In the method of selecting magistrates, for instance, Aristotle calls lottery “democratic” and election “oligarchic,” despite the fact that elections were common in constitutions that he clearly regards as democratic, and lottery not unheard of in oligarchies. The resulting impression is that one can tally up the various elements, once they have been labeled, of a particular constitution under investigation and decide if it is a democracy or an oligarchy.

Aristotle’s method does not jibe with what we know about actual political dialogue and practice from the classical period. “Oligarchy” is a particular kind of power structure, not an amalgamation of handful of “oligarchical” institutions, and its most important defining feature was the exclusion of the masses from real political power. There were a variety of ways in which this could be accomplished, including property qualifications for office and/or for voting, informal restrictions on office-holding through election, small boards of powerful magistrates, life tenure for important offices, lack of accountability of magistrates to popular bodies, and, most importantly, a particular type of election that was based on candidates’ characters, not their policies. I will provide examples of all these potential mechanisms in order to illustrate the diversity of methods by which oligarchic power could be ensured.

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