

**Governance and Dictators; An Independent Study on Political Science Through
the Lens of History**

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Abstract

This report is a philosophical commentary on the Greek philosopher Plato's idea of a Philosopher King as an ideal form of government. First describing the need to find a better form of government than democracy, this paper explores the differences between a Philosopher King and a democrat, and how their rise to power might be different. Additionally, the paper explores how a Philosopher King might maintain power. In the final section, historical examples of Philosopher Kings, and their legacies are explored.

Background; Pondering the Question of a Better Form of Government Than Democracy

The Cold War that occurred after World War II is generally considered to have ended in 1991 during the formal collapse of the USSR. The war was often framed as communism vs democracy, the USSR and the United States supporting such forms of the state respectively. Democracy and representative governments spreading across the world have influenced the way people think about government. In 2017, the Pew Research Center conducted a study for 41,953 respondents spanning across 28 countries, and when asked if a representative democracy would be a “good or bad way of governing [their] country”, an overwhelming 78% believed it would be a “good” way. In contrast, rule by a strong leader and rule by the military had significantly less support, with 71% and 73% respectively believing it would be a “bad” way of governing a country. (Wike 2017)

While this poll may seem to initially conclude that democracy is a superior form of government in the eyes of the modern age, when asked if they believe that democracy “is working”, a majority said they were dissatisfied. Focusing specifically on the United States, only 46% of the population were satisfied with how democracy was working in their country. (Wike 2017)

The discrepancy between what Americans believe is a “good” form of government *in theory*, versus how people perceive it when implemented might be explained by the fact that most Americans would not have lived under a totalitarian regime, and if they had, they would believe democracy to provide for a better quality of life. Another explanation is the cultural appreciation and value for democracy, stemming back to Greek philosophy, then to the essence of the American Revolution for independence from The British Empire, and up to the Cold War.

Is there truly a better form of governance than a representative democracy? Is there a form of government people would be more satisfied with more than an institution, of the people, by the people, and for the people?

Plato believed so.

Plato and the Philosopher King

Plato was an Athenian philosopher who lived from 428-347 B.C, and through his writings and teachings is credited with significantly influencing Western thought and ideology. It may not be surprising that Plato believed a better form of government existed than democracy, given his life during the Peloponnesian War saw the fall of Athens to Sparta; the democracy of his homeland falling to a powerful foreign aristocracy (Riginos 1976). Whatever may have influenced his thought process, Plato argued in favor of a “Philosopher King”, through a series of thought experiments.

Imagine you are on a crewed vessel, lost at sea. Would you attempt to have the unskilled crew attempt to steer the ship home, by collectively pointing in a direction at sea and picking a general point of agreement? Or might it be better to find a skilled navigator with the knowledge of maps and stars to navigate the ship home? (Plato 1943)

Plato creates the metaphor of a “ship of state”, where governance is an acquired skill that requires years of study and is best suited for a scholarly philosopher (not unlike Plato himself). A Philosopher King would have absolute power over his people, and why shouldn't he? He has the knowledge to steer the “ship of state” and will thus provide for the best direction for his country to go. Philosophers are “lovers of wisdom”, and possess the qualities of aptitude, dependability, and willingness to put the needs of the people before their own.

In the United States as of October of 2021, only a single senator in the Senate, and 27 out of 435 representatives in the House of Representatives had a Ph.D. One would think that the most powerful legislative positions in the country would require the highest levels of education. Would a senate of Philosopher Kings, all of whom acquired PhDs and advanced degrees make better decisions than a group whose only qualification is being likable enough to get elected?

The Question of Selection

A critical question to Plato's Philosopher King idea is how such a leader would be selected. This is potentially a problem in all forms of epistocracy, where the knowledgeable rule over the interchangeable. How can competency decide who rules when competency is relative?

But competency as a political leader is not entirely relative. The point of a government is to provide laws and law enforcement to promote the lives of its constituents. On the most basic level, this would be safety from enemies, the environment, and from violent anarchy within. A government that can, either directly or indirectly, provide the highest quality of life for its people is the most competent.

According to the World Health Organization, quality of life is defined as...

“Individual's perceptions of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns. It is a broad ranging concept incorporating in a complex way the persons' physical health, psychological state, level of independence, social relationships, personal beliefs, and their relationships to salient features of the environment”

This is a broad definition but provides guidelines for what a competent leader should provide for their constituents. A Philosopher King would understand such a definition and work to fulfill its meaning for the people to the best of their ability.

Starting with physical health, a Philosopher King would be knowledgeable enough to understand to a high degree of scientific efficacy the underlying factors that influence food and drug regulations. A Philosopher King would understand the nuances of optimizing legislature to benefit most of the population. A Philosopher King would also have a historical understanding of war and peace and better optimize their country for nonviolence. This higher wisdom is opposed to a democrat, who would wage war if only their people requested it.

The argument has been made that competency is not entirely relative. However, this is competency based on actions. Is there a subjective measure of competency based on preparation for the role of the navigator of the ship of state? That is; can a measure of competency be obtained before the Philosopher King even comes to power?

The Rise of the Philosopher King; The Natural Course of Events

One might start with education. A Philosopher King would require a solid background in philosophy, history, policy, and a variety of other subjects. However, there would undoubtedly be various characters who fit the role for most educated to lead, so one must be chosen. The general populous is unsuited to choose a leader, so the leader must be chosen by the state, existing legislative infrastructure, and the military.

The Philosopher King, to implement his superior ideas must persuade the existing governance and military with material possession. Once in power, he will work for the benefit of society but given a larger populous that would be unable to grasp his superior ideas, and existing governance and military that would also be inferior, he must temporarily betray his morals to lead.

However, to win over the support of the government, the kings must now all compete against each other to determine who can provide the most private rewards to the local government. The smartest Philosopher Kings would realize that the payment could even occur after the election to allow for more time to accumulate funds. Again, all in the name of implementing the better ideas in a society ruled by a well-educated, benevolent Philosopher King.

Given the competition for private rewards to the most crucial coalition of leaders in the country, the Philosopher King is chosen and comes promising even more future rewards to his backers. Should he not provide these future rewards, he will be displaced as a leader. A leader who cannot keep his promises cannot rule a country as a Philosopher King.

Maintaining Power as Philosopher King

To achieve a place in office, the Philosopher King is now in a position where he must repay his essential backers in governance. The military and government keeping him in power can be thought of as the “winning” coalition. Even though the king is now in power, he still faces the challenge of maintaining power. These backers, if promised a higher reward, would turn their backs on the current Philosopher King. Its only reasonable, as they aren’t Philosopher Kings themselves, and wouldn’t understand why they should be keeping the current Philosopher King in power.

So, for the betterment of his people and society, the Philosopher King must make it a priority to continue paying out private rewards to his essential backers. This may come in the form of taxation. In fact, for the time being, the Philosopher King must put the needs of his coalition first before the needs of his people. This means forgoing the public spending and policy that was originally intended and putting those funds towards the paychecks of his generals.

Temporarily, without spending on public goods and services, the productivity of the state will begin to falter. Thus, with a less productive state, a much larger percentage of the output of the society will need to be taken to repay the essential backers.

Infrastructure spending, education, and public health measure must take a back seat, at least temporarily to the rewards going to the leaders keeping the king in power. Without an educated society, the people's only form of productivity becomes low-skill labor. To a degree, this makes the job of the military who keep the Philosopher King in power easier, as uneducated people are less likely to revolt. An educated people would be able to organize; foolishly against a Philosopher King who will ultimately if given enough time allow the people to prosper. They may be poor, starving, and angry people now, but soon they will be thriving.

The Rise of a Democrat

Unlike a Philosopher King, a democrat need not be educated well on the issues that plague the state. Instead, they must only be able to convince the people that they understand the issues and have ideas on how to solve them. Instead of the very few Philosopher Kings from the top universities in the world, the selection pool for an average democrat is significantly larger. In the United States, to become president the only requirements are being a natural-born United States citizen, being a resident of the United States for at least 14 years and being at least 35 years old (Milkis and Nelson 2008).

In this pool of potential candidates, there is a significant number who would destroy the nation. This is a disadvantage as compared to the Philosopher King, who already must be qualified. The only preventative measure in place to stop a lunatic democrat from obtaining office is his ability to convince voters that his ideas are the best. To make matters worse, he doesn't even need to convince everybody; only enough of the population to get elected. In a perfect democracy, this would only need to be 50% of the population. This is unlike the Philosopher King, who would be wise enough to implement policies that benefit as many people in the nation as possible.

A democrat could either be ignorant of the changes that are possible or lie about changes and policies that are feasible and not intend on doing any of them. The people are not Philosopher Kings, so they wouldn't know the difference between a feasible, or infeasible policy.

Retaining Power as a Democrat

A democrat is elected via popular vote, based on policies that benefit the greatest number of people. This includes stronger roads, better education, and greater public health. However, unlike the Philosopher King, the democrat is beholden to his people, or at least the smaller section of the public who voted for him. The Philosopher King needs only to keep his small group of essential backers loyal; a democrat must keep an entire population. The democrat is in a much more difficult position. A Philosopher King doesn't need to worry about pleasing anyone other than his few essential backers, other than that, he can focus entirely on making a better society with his superior wisdom.

The democrat straight away must begin pleasing his larger group of supporters with public policy that would keep him in power. These stronger roads, better schools, and greater public health measures must be implemented quickly, or the people will lose faith and elect someone else. The Philosopher King doesn't have this issue and may take as much time as necessary to accomplish his goals.

Additionally, the democrat suffers the consequence of a productive, educated people. These people are likely the revolt in the case of an unpopular leader, due to their ability to organize. Additionally, unpopular

policies such as the disablement of communication networks would lead to the removal of a democrat, thus, a democrat must be wary of a powerful, organized, educated populous. A Philosopher King would have no such worry, as an economy that has become reliant on manual labor is not as easily organized.

Historical Examples of the Philosopher King

Through catalyzing questions in the past section of this paper, the idea of a Philosopher King was deconstructed, and how any practical implementation may fail. This section hopes to analyze historical examples of such Philosopher Kings.

It may be surprising to know, but many of the contemporary dictators responsible for the worst human rights violations were educated in prestigious institutions. Alastair Smith and Bruce Bueno De Mesquita are well known political scientists, and in their book *The Dictators Handbook* they write,

“Dictators also like to have their children educated in leading universities in the United States, and especially at Oxford university in the United Kingdom. In fact, one might almost conclude that Oxford is a breeding ground for authoritarians. It certainly is the alma mater of many, including Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe, The Bhutto family of Pakistan, kings of Jordan, Bhutan, Malaysia, and even little Tonga” (Mesquita 2011)

It is not particularly surprising that a dictator could attend higher education; through corruption families of dictators tend to be wealthy. Every family on the list above is worth over 10 million dollars. Evidence can be seen in the previous section as to why this knowledge doesn’t pan out to a successful country. Each of these dictators had a small coalition of military, generals, and politicians who they need to provide private rewards for in order to stay in power. These private rewards aren’t spent on the populations for which they lead.

Additionally, the previous section outlining the logical progression of events describes the competition of Philosopher Kings for power. Often however, dictators will destroy any growing meritocracy before any rivals begin to pursue their reign. Anyone who is educated enough to potentially take over the “ship of state” is removed.

Saddam Hussein came to power in Iraq 1979, and within days of his rise 450 Ba’ath leaders of the current prevailing political party which sentence to death by firing squad. According to Mesquita and Smith, these leaders were probably, “professors, military officers, lawyer, judges, business leaders, journalists, religious leaders, and many other well-educated and accomplished men” (Mesquita 2011)

Although its possible that having competent followers to run the country would be beneficial to a ruling dictator, or Philosopher King, overwhelmingly dictators decide it is not worth the risk to have the potential rivals. It’s possible to consider Saddam Hussein a Philosopher King of sorts; he studied Iraq law for three years in a higher education institution in Iraq. However, his rise to power and subsequent killing off

potential rivals demonstrates the natural course of events that a totalitarian Philosopher King would experience.

Additionally, this paper explored how a ruler who rises to power without public election is often subject to turning over private rewards to members of government keeping him in power and neglecting his people. Historically, this is accurate. This can be seen by analyzing Turkey and Iran as a case study.

Turkey and Iran are both of roughly equivalent populations, 75 and 73 million respectively. Iran, however, is considered one of the most corrupt ranking thirty-second worst in 2010. Turkey was placed on the list as well at fifty-sixth. Turkey is a more functional democracy than Iran. Iran has higher taxes than Turkey, at 32% of its GDP, compared to Turkey's 22.5%. This higher tax rate is for the dictators at the top of Iran's government to pay back their essential supporters.

Despite the higher tax rate, as of 2009, Iran only brought in 105.9 billion, as compared to Turkey's 138.8 billion in taxes. This is because Turkey has policy in place that promotes productivity for its people. Better infrastructure, health care, and education results in a per capita income in Turkey of \$13,730, compared to Iran's \$4,530 (Mesquita 2011).

Comparing Turkey and Iran makes the result of corruption evident. Iran cannot afford to spend their higher tax on public good because it needs to be spent funding private rewards for a select group of government backers. Turkey on the other hand, has more money to spend on public goods, and has a more productive society where they can also take a smaller percentage of output in taxes, and still produce more net internal revenue.

Philosopher Kings in Democracy

This paper has analyzed the example of a Philosopher King who rises to power based on Plato's idea that the general population could not be trusted to elect a Philosopher King, as they would not recognize one. However, examples in US history demonstrate democratic candidates elected loosely based on ideas of an epistocracy, where the knowledgeable rule over the interchangeable.

Jimmy Carter emphasized his achievements in education in his campaign ads. In the very opening statement of his campaign Ad "Man Revised" he brings up the fact that he "went to Georgia southwestern college where he studied chemistry... went to Georgia tech where he studied engineering... to the U.S. naval academy and received a degree in naval science... union college and is connected in New York where he did graduate work in nuclear physics" (Carter 1976) Jimmy Carter was relatively unknown to the country when he ran for president in 1976, where only about 2% of the nation was familiar with him (Frank 1995). However, he used his extensive education background as evidence that he would be successful and came into office as the 39th president of the United States in 1977.

His campaign capitalized on the idea that American voters would put their trust in a Philosopher King, who was fit to be president because of his scholarly achievements. However, voter support did not last, and Jimmy Carter reached a disapproval rate of 59%, the third lowest in history at that time (Frank 1995). Although an appeal to Carter was that he was an outsider to Washington, an engineer, and a scientist, his

objectively unsuccessful career as president demonstrates that even an *elected* Philosopher King, may still fail to provide for better governance than a person elected based on other factors during their campaign.

Another example of a democratically elected Philosopher King is Thomas Jefferson. Thomas Jefferson is widely regarded as one of the most intelligent presidents elected. During John F. Kennedy's speech at a dinner honoring Nobel prize winners, he remarked, "I think this is the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge, that has ever been gathered at the White House – with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone" (Burbank 2010). Jefferson, at 16, was accepted into the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg Virginia, where he studied metaphysics, philosophy, and mathematics. He also passed the bar exam in Virginia in 1767. Jefferson was president from 1801 to 1809.

According to a c-span survey of historians, Thomas Jefferson ranks 8th most persuasive of all US presidents (C-Span 2020). It makes sense that a person with the education and background of Jefferson would be able to convince voters and his coalition of his ideas. One of the most known achievements of Thomas Jefferson's presidency was his Louisiana purchase, that nearly doubled the size of the United States.

However, unlike Carter, Jefferson was already well known in the public eye. In addition to the role, he played during the American Revolution and as secretary of state under Washington, Jefferson was also the vice president under the Adams administration. Being well known, especially in the federal government was crucial to Thomas Jefferson obtaining office at all, due to a tie in the electoral college in his election of 1800 which resulted in the House of Representatives voting him into presidency (Tucker 1837). His education played a role in his election and success as a president, however, his experience in government and network he made as a politician probably played an even larger role in his election.

Plato and the Philosopher King; Is there a better metric of leadership than Intelligence?

Plato asks the question to the reader of *The Republic* if it would be better to have the crew, or a skilled navigator steer the ship of state. It is a hypothetical situation, and with most hypothetical situations, has caveats that make it unrealistic. If democratic voters were told they could snap their fingers and obtain the most perfect ruler, many probably would. However, the journey to obtain power as an aristocrat filters out any benevolent ruler, and forces corruption of future forms of aristocracy. Intelligence and competency are not necessarily an indicator of benevolence as a ruler. Instead, the best forms of government are democracies where voters take qualifications into account but focus on the ideas of a candidate. Analyzing a platform of a candidate and holding them to that platform. Democracy isn't perfect because the voters who ultimately drive decisions in government aren't perfect. Winston Churchill captures this idea when asked to assess democracy as a form of government saying, "democracy is the worst form of government except for all others" (Quinault 1979).

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