

Adam Kasti

Classical Political Thought

26 September 2025

Classifying the Current American Government Using Aristotle's *Politics*

On January 20th of this year, Donald Trump took the oath of office for the Presidency of the United States. Inside the Capitol building's Rotunda, a number of notable elites in American society—former Presidents, public officials, representatives of several world leaders, CEOs of technology and social media companies—sat around him as he delivered his inaugural address, many of whom stood to gain greater wealth once he and Congress began their work. Following the formal ceremonies Trump headed to the Capital One Arena, where he signed several executive orders in front of an audience of his supporters. To them he had promised a return to American greatness by cracking down on “illegal immigration,” cutting down government bureaucracy, and even promising to be a dictator “only on day one” (Colvin and Barrow).

Aristotle's *Politics* focused on the study of political communities—which he refers to as “cities”—and their regimes, or how they arrange their “authoritative offices” (*Pol.* 1287b10). Regimes that aim towards the “common advantage” of all in a city—namely justice as understood by the regime with regard to virtue and living well—are called “correct” regimes; meanwhile, regimes aiming for the advantage of the ruler or ruling group are considered “deviant” regimes (*Pol.* 1279a18-22). At this moment, the United States can best be classified under Aristotle's schematic of regimes as an oligarchy exhibiting characteristics of a “small democracy.” Despite its large geographic size, in the American regime authoritative offices are held and influenced by the wealthy, profit is being pursued by the rich at a greater rate than honor or virtue, and many of the wealthy provide “useless” public services to the multitude. The oligarchic regime may be

destroyed by a revolution towards tyranny— usually achieved through factional conflict— by pursuit of “wanton living,” attempts to rule by decree, and attempted use of arms against the multitude. Such a revolution is arguably being attempted by one of the regime’s officeholders Donald Trump, through his behavior in office in line with these revolutionary causes.

Aristotle’s defines oligarchy as a “deviant” regime where rule is “with a view to the advantage of the well-off,” regardless of whether they are a majority or minority in the regime’s population (*Pol.* 1279b8-9, 1280a2-3). Oligarchies conceive of justice and equality to be based on “merit,” believing their wealth and property grants them the right to hold authoritative offices (*Pol.* 1280a26-28). As Aristotle expands on his conceptions of democracies and oligarchies in several later points in the *Politics*, his description of a “small democracy” appears in Book 6 in his discussion of how to establish and maintain oligarchies. In that discussion, Aristotle says that oligarchs ought to provide part of their property for “common... use by the poor” or for the poor to work on so they may “maintain the benevolence of the multitude” (*Pol.* 1320b7-11). In addition, public services ought to be required in authoritative offices so that the multitude is “willing to forego taking part in them, and may feel indulgence” for those ruling choosing to carry such burdens (*Pol.* 1321a35-40).

That being said, Aristotle notes that oligarchs fail to exercise honor through useful public service in authoritative offices, and instead “are in search of spoils,” making the regimes they rule “small democracies” (*Pol.* 1321a41-1321b1). Although he refers to such regimes as “small democracies,” they can arguably be considered oligarchies because in their pursuit of wealth, oligarchs are acting in line with one of Aristotle’s defined characteristics of democracy— namely “freedom,” which is living “as one wants” (*Pol.* 1317b10-15). For the oligarchs, this would mean the freedom to pursue greater wealth. However, in that “small democratic” regime, the wealthy—

not the multitude— hold the authoritative offices while continuing this practice of “freedom” to pursue wealth, which the “small democracy” an oligarchy (*Pol.* 1321a41-1321b1); in other words, this regime has the form of an oligarchy with the behavioral substance of democracy.

There are several observations of the United States’ current regime that fit within Aristotle’s framework of an oligarchy behaving like a “small democracy.” Justice and the subsequent right to rule in the current regime is motivated by claims of merit. This is exemplified by the “bootstrap ethos” commonplace in American thought that those who have worked hard deserve the wealth they have, giving them the necessary experience to rule. Electoral campaigns for authoritative offices in the regime such as Congress and the Presidency are significantly high enough that the wealthy are more likely to run since, as they can more easily repay campaign costs that may not be covered by donations to political parties (“Costs of Elections”). The Supreme Court case *Citizens United v. FEC* also allowed for greater amounts of money to be donated to political campaigns through SuperPACs (if there is no coordination with any campaigns, but this is not rigorously adhered to), thus allowing the wealthy to possess greater influence in the candidates and winners of elections (Weiner).

Establishing that the wealthy are able to play a significant role in the American regime, their pursuit of wealth at a greater rate than honor or virtue— especially many of the wealthy involved with the government— provides evidence towards the United States oligarchy behaving as a “small democracy.” The most significant evidence of this is the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBA), signed by President Trump on Independence Day. The act increases tax cuts implemented during Trump’s first term, while reducing spending for a number of programs that low-income citizens rely on, including SNAP (formerly known as food stamps) and Medicaid. The bill additionally increases the debt ceiling and national deficit significantly (Parlapiano and

Sanger-Katz). Congressional Republican officials repeatedly stated that cuts to these assistance programs were made to limit fraudulent spending and remove the ability of “illegal immigrants” to access these programs, despite evidence contrary to these claims (Parlapiano and Sanger-Katz).

Several reports and analyses have indicated that the act will facilitate a significant transfer of wealth from poorer members of the regime to richer ones (Iacurci). Given such a transfer of wealth comes at the expense of the multitude in the regime and that many who voted for the legislation lied about its effects, virtue and providing benefit to the multitude being ruled were not the motivators for the OBBB, leaving profit as the significant motivation. As a result, the OBBB demonstrates in practice the United States oligarchic regime exhibiting behaviors of a “small democracy,” as members of the oligarchy were engaged in lawmaking that will enhance their personal wealth at the expense of others, and allow themselves to continue pursuing “freedom” within their lifestyle (*Pol.* 1321a41-1321b1).

Regarding the passage of the OBBB, it should be noted this was not a unanimous vote by Congress. In both chambers, the bill passed by only one vote, with the Vice President breaking the tie in the Senate (“Roll Call 145,” “Roll Call 119th”). It could be argued that given Congressional Democrats voted against this legislation, these congresspeople were not motivated by profit, but rather honor. However, despite this motivation, many Democrats are not receiving “honor” or praise for their work from their voter base who are growing discontented with the Democratic party and its leadership in government (Peoples, Linley, and Yoo). Additionally, these officeholders may sometimes be motivated by profit and not honor to vote a particular way on a given piece of legislation. For example, bills banning congressional stock trading have failed in the past, as Congress members of both parties were motivated by wealth to preserve

their stock investments (Guggenheim). As a result, Congressional Democrats may at times be motivated by profit instead of honor, but this motivation is not absolute.

The wealthy, in addition to engaging in “small democratic” behavior by their pursuit of wealth, provide public services that are of minimal use or positive effective to the multitude, hence that service being “useless.” Although arguments can be made that the wealthy provide useful public services through jobs in their companies, such as Elon Musk with Tesla and Jeff Bezos with Amazon, it should be noted that there are significant gaps between workers’ wages in these companies and Musk and Bezos’s net worths of several billion dollars. Aristotle said that one key to preserving regimes is to avoid “the multitude [being] overly poor” (*Pol.* 1320a32-33). Although Aristotle mentions this as a method of preservation for popular democratic regimes, he notes earlier in the *Politics* that differences in “wealth and poverty” is a significant cause of factional conflict generally and revolution that could possibly emerge from it (*Pol.* 1303b15-16). There is a growing inequality of wealth in America, most noticeable when comparing the federal minimum wage \$7.25 and the net worth of many elites in the nation (“Income Inequality”). This disparity in wealth and the minimal financial assistance negates any usefulness of the public service and “benevolence” of these jobs.

In addition to identifying the kinds of regimes a city can take, Aristotle studies in his *Politics* what causes a regime to undergo “revolution,” or a change in a regime type or structure. This regime change can either be a minimal as a change in who holds the authoritative office—such as the transfer of power between Presidents of the United States— or a complete change in the regime type and how many hold power (*Pol.* 1301b5-19). Factional conflict between differing groups— usually divided between rich and poor— is one such catalyst for revolution, and is primarily caused by inequality, as people may seek to be more equal or unequal in profit or

honor, depending on their adherence to ideas of justice as mentioned previously (*Pol.* 1301b26-29).

Factional conflict may also arise by those seeking profit or honor, or to avoid punishment or dishonor (*Pol.* 1302a32-35). Aristotle notes several ways oligarchies undergo revolution and are destroyed. The first one he lists when oligarchs “treat the multitude unjustly,” which then encourages popular leaders (whether from the multitude, or the wealthy within or outside of the oligarchy) to lead a revolution (*Pol.* 1305a38-40, 1310b12-15). One other notable cause of revolution Aristotle lists is when oligarchs seek to “expend their private life in wanton living,” which aims at establishing tyranny (*Pol.* 1305b40-1306a1). These aforementioned methods of revolution have the potential to descend into “tyranny,” which Aristotle defines as “monarchic rule of a master over the political community” (*Pol.* 1279b16-17). As for tyranny itself, Aristotle notes that it has the “evils of both democracy and oligarchy,” which he says includes “the sequestration of heavy arms,... [and] ill-treatment of the mass” common to oligarchy and the “war on the notables” common to democracy (*Pol.* 1311a9-20). An oligarchy with the characteristics of a “small democracy” may see an oligarch attempt a revolution towards tyranny not only out of a desire for greater profit, but to do so without limits to themselves and their freedom, while at the same time possibly limiting the profit and potential threat that can be posed by other oligarchs.

Contemporary politics in the United States provides evidence that the United States is undergoing a process of revolution from oligarchy, likely into tyranny. Although not all characteristics of tyranny have appeared in the United States, actions taken by Donald Trump provide evidence that he has oriented himself and his office towards such tyranny. Having had three different criminal trials pending against him and one criminal trial where he was found

guilty, Trump campaigned on being unfairly targeted, and his campaign could arguably be an attempt to instigate factional conflict to avoid the punishments and dishonor that may have resulted from guilty verdicts (which he arguably succeeded at) (Gregorian and Reiss). Trump's campaigns have also involved promises to root out the "deep state" of government elites and bring back jobs to Americans, tapping into claims of "war on the notables" on behalf of a multitude in the United States was being treated unjustly (Swenson).

While in office, Trump has engaged in "wanton living" and arguably for his own self-interest at the expense of others in the regime. The most significant example is Trump accepting a jet from Qatar to be used as Air Force One and then to be given to his Presidential Museum following the conclusion of his Presidency (Lonsdorf). In addition, Trump has maintained control over a "meme coin" cryptocurrency he established immediately before his assumption of the Presidency (Lipton). Both actions have raised ethics concerns as Presidents cannot accept gifts from other countries without Congressional approval and are expected to divest from their business(es) before assuming office. These actions indicate Trump is using his authoritative office for his personal benefit, and not for the common advantage.

Additional evidence of orientation towards tyranny can be found through Trump's usage of Executive Orders in ways contradictory to previous officeholders. In addition to DOGE being established through executive order, another order signed by Trump attempted to repeal the "birthright citizenship" clause of the Constitution's 14th Amendment, while Presidents are not involved in the amendment process according to the Constitution (Wofsy). Furthermore, Trump's "sequestration of heavy arms" has led to having law enforcement agencies using those arms and force to target the multitude. Two notable examples of this are ICE rounding up immigrants and deporting them without trials to third-party countries, and calling the National Guard into

multiple cities including Los Angeles and the District of Columbia, promising to do the same to other cities (Hippensteel, Gupta). These actions indicate a willingness to use force arms against the multitude to instigate fear and, as Aristotle describes, foster “incapacity for activity,” one of the methods he suggested tyrants use to maintain their rule (*Pol.* 1314a23-25).

In the United States, the wealthy are able to play a significant role in the government whether by getting elected to office or providing financial support to their campaigns. As a result, wealth is being pursued by elites in and out of government at a greater rate than honor or virtue, demonstrated by the One Big Beautiful Bill Act. Any public services they may provide such as with jobs in their companies are not entirely useful due to their minimal tangible effect on the multitude, who are dealing with a significant amount of income inequality. Under Aristotle’s classification of regimes, this would make the United States an oligarchy with the behavioral tendencies of a “small democracy.” Such an oligarchy may undergo revolution into tyranny due to a desire to avoid punishment and dishonor, and an increase in personal wealth and “wanton living,” while preventing other oligarchs from pursuing greater profit or posing a significant threat. Through rallying the multitude against the elites, and using sequestered arms against the multitude, this revolution would destroy the oligarchic regime and move it towards tyranny. It is through such means Donald Trump was elected to authoritative office, and is engaging in such behaviors against the “deep state” in a desire to bring about such a revolution towards tyranny.

Works Cited

- Aristotle. *Politics*. 2013. Translated by Carnes Lord. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Blaeser, Jessie. “Just How Much Has Doge Exaggerated Its Numbers? Now We Have Receipts. - Politico.” Politico, August 12, 2025. <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/08/12/trump-doge-contract-claims-savings-inflation-00498178>.
- Colvin, Jill, and Bill Barrow. “Trump’s Vow to Only Be a Dictator on ‘Day One’ Follows Growing Worry over His Authoritarian Rhetoric.” AP News, December 7, 2023. https://apnews.com/article/trump-hannity-dictator-authoritarian-presidential-election-f27e7e9d7c13fabbe3ae7dd7f1235c72?utm_source=copy&utm_medium=share.
- “Cost of Election.” Opensecrets. Accessed September 21, 2025. <https://www.opensecrets.org/elections-overview/cost-of-election>.
- Gregorian, Dareh, and Adam Reiss. “New York Appeals Court Throws out Trump’s More than \$500 Million Fraud Judgment.” NBCNews.com, August 22, 2025. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/ny-appeals-court-throws-trumps-500-million-fraud-judgment-rcna217340>.
- Gupta, Gaya. “Lawsuit Says U.S. Deported Migrants to Ghana to Sidestep Restrictions.” The Washington Post, September 13, 2025. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2025/09/13/ghana-deportation-trump-migrants/>.
- Hippensteel, Chris. “Trump Is Expanding the National Guard’s Role. Some Former Generals Worry.” The New York Times, September 21, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/21/us/national-guard-crime-washington-cities.html>.

- Howard, Andrew. "Dems Pile on Schumer as Bashing Goes Mainstream." Politico, March 19, 2025. <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/03/19/schumer-bashing-has-gone-mainstream-00237901>.
- Iacurci, Greg. "House Republican Tax Bill Favors the Rich - How Much They Stand to Gain, and Why." CNBC, May 23, 2025. <https://www.cnbc.com/2025/05/23/house-republican-big-beautiful-tax-bill-favors-the-rich.html>.
- "Income Inequality." Inequality.org, August 4, 2025. <https://inequality.org/facts/income-inequality/>.
- Lipton, Eric. "Trump Begins Selling New Crypto Token, Raising Ethical Concerns." The New York Times, January 18, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/18/us/politics/trump-meme-coin-crypto.html>.
- Lonsdorf, Kat. "Trump Administration Officially Accepts Jet from Qatar for Use as Air Force One." NPR, May 21, 2025. <https://www.npr.org/2025/05/21/nx-s1-5406420/trump-accepts-qatar-plane-air-force-one>.
- Parlapiano, Alicia, and Margot Sanger-Katz. "9 Questions About the Republican Megabill, Answered." The New York Times, July 3, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/03/upshot/republican-bill-faq.html>.
- Peoples, Steve, Linley Sanders, and Hyojin Yoo. "'They Roll Right Over': Many Democrats Think Their Party Is Weak, AP-Norc Poll Finds." PBS, August 3, 2025. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/they-roll-right-over-many-democrats-think-their-party-is-weak-ap-norc-poll-finds>.
- "Roll Call 145, Bill Number: H. R. 1, 119th Congress, 1st Session." Office of the Clerk, U.S. House of Representatives, May 22, 2025. <https://clerk.house.gov/Votes/2025145>.

“Roll Call Vote 119th Congress - 1st Session.” U.S. Senate, July 1, 2025.

https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll_call_votes/vote1191/vote_119_1_00372.htm.

Swenson, Ali. “Trump Has Long Warned of a Government ‘deep State.’ Now in Power, He’s under Pressure to Expose It.” AP News, May 30, 2025.

<https://apnews.com/article/epstein-files-assassination-trump-fbi-conspiracies-aaeb07814bb8b6b3fe595f5b68e4163a>.

Weiner, Daniel I. “Citizens United Explained.” Brennan Center for Justice, December 12, 2019.

<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/citizens-united-explained>.

Wofsy, Cody. “Trump’s Birthright Citizenship Executive Order: What Happens next: ACLU.”

American Civil Liberties Union, August 6, 2025. <https://www.aclu.org/news/immigrants-rights/trumps-birthright-citizenship-executive-order-what-happens-next>.