

## Plato's Disappointment in America: How the Presidency Differs from Plato's Ideal (Topic 1)

In *the Republic*, Plato describes his ideal city state and political structure. Divided into three roles, at the top, ruling society, are the philosopher kings. The philosopher kings are described by Plato to be highly educated individuals who were capable of merging power and authority with their philosophical knowledge of the true form of good to rule, while building a political system that distributes the benefits of knowledge of good amongst the citizens. In Plato's view, the institution of the American Presidency would not be a good representation of his ideal philosopher-king because the presidents are not explicitly trained and educated to assume this role, and ideally, following Plato's vision, government leaders would not be democratically elected as American presidents are.

Plato's political structure relies on his theory of the soul. According to his theory of the soul, there are three separate kinds of desires: appetitive, spirited, and rational, where each desire rules in the souls of different types of people, determining their values. Appetitive desires are defined as those for food, drink, sex, and the money to acquire those desires, while spirited desires are the desires for honor, victory, and a good reputation, and rational desires are those for truth and knowledge. Plato's theory asserts that people value the thing they desire most, making the three types of people have different ideas of what is most valuable and good (Plato, 580d – 581d). By this theory, the type of desires that a person has is dependent on the education and socialization they receive, making the primary goal of education to socialize desires for the pursuit of true happiness (Plato, 518b-519d). Plato demonstrates this theory throughout his argument, using examples and his ideal society to illustrate his point.

One such example Plato introduces to show the effects of education on socializing desires is the allegory of the cave (Plato, 514a). In his allegory, Plato begins by describing the uneducated people, who with their unsocialized desires are not virtuous, and tend to act only on

their whims. When these people begin the process of education, they are trained first to shape their desires through a mix of literature and music, and begin to be ruled by their socialized appetites (Plato, 430a). These newly educated people have gained a level of virtue to act practically and cautiously. Plato refers to these people as money-lovers, because they begin to gain appetitive desires, working for money as the best way to satisfy those desires. Further education in mathematics and science trains people to be ruled by spirited desires. These people become honor-lovers, trained to work for success in difficult tasks, with the goal of honor and approval. These people reach a level of greater virtue Plato labels political virtues (Plato, 430c). People can receive even further education in dialectic training and city management to hone their rational desires. These people are free from illusion and can see good itself, rather than images of good. These people are wisdom lovers and philosophers, and have knowledge about virtue, reaching the stage of being fully virtuous. Plato emphasizes that not everyone can receive all levels of education because some people's natural desires are too strong for education to change, but that these natural differences are important as they divide his ideal society up into the three classes of producers, guardians, and philosopher-kings, allowing these groups to work together for a just system.

In many ways, the American education system and socialization both politically and personally, resembles Plato's allegory of the cave. In young children, the idea of unsocialized desires can be seen, and the first steps of education are formulated in early school years with the similar mix of literature and music to teach the beginnings of cautious virtue. As students continue their education, the school system typically begins to focus on mathematics and science, training students to be analytical and problem solvers, while the education system's focus on success and grades tends to lead to students needing validation of good grades, similar to Plato's theory of honor-lovers. Finishing out with higher education, some people do receive similar training for their rational desires. People who seek out this sort of education tend to be those who enjoy learning, and could be seen as Plato's wisdom lovers and philosophers. In the American education system, a similar idea to Plato's emphasis on the fact that not everyone can receive all levels can be seen. Often, people try to stress that anyone can pursue higher

education, and while that is true, it is also true that not all people have to, or can go through all levels of higher education, whether for financial reasons, differing interests, or because it is not the best choice for their mental wellbeing. In the American political system, there is a society wide insistence that potential politicians be educated, which following Plato's ideal society is extremely important in making sure that the government leaders are trained to properly lead the state. Additionally, while it is important to remember that higher education should not be restricted based on socioeconomic status, it is not the right choice for everyone, and that demonstrates how the American education system follows Plato's theory of education and political socialization for his ideal society.

At the top of his system, Plato places the philosopher-kings as the ruling class. Plato believes that judgement is best when placed as the responsibility of the ruler, in his case the philosopher-king. Judgement is defined as a statement that comes out of understanding, and because the ruler in Plato's ideal society is trained to understand the true nature of the good and the just, their pronouncements are seen as a source of irrefutable wisdom, because only someone who knows the true, ideal forms can express true judgements (Maier, slide 5). In his ideal society, Plato assigned each role a different responsibility in terms of judgement (Maier, slide 7). At the top, the philosopher-king is the ideal ruler, able to bring the various parts of society together in harmony. The ruler can define and express rational imperative judgement (Maier, slide 6). These judgements can then be shared with the guardians, who carry out the executive and judicial judgements made by the philosopher-kings. Finally, the bottom class, the artisans, are under the rational obligation to obey the laws of the state that are created by the rulers' judgements. Due to their training, as illustrated by the allegory of the cave, the philosopher-kings are best suited to make calls of judgement for society as a whole.

While the American system of democracy is based on ancient Greece's democracy, Plato, however, would likely disapprove of the institution of the American presidency as it does not follow the same structure as his ideal system with the philosopher-king. Plato's system emphasizes the importance of having a leader chosen because of their expert knowledge and specific training to be a leader, a trait that is not shared by the American presidency. While it is

true that many people who run for president are experts in leadership and American politics, there are cases, such as former President Trump, where they have no prior experience in politics. Even if presidential candidates have prior experience, they were not explicitly educated and trained to assume the role of state leadership the way Plato's system educates philosopher-kings. In his arguments, Plato illustrates the issues of a system that is not based on expert knowledge in the allegory of the ship. He describes a ship where the shipowner is physically bigger, taller, and stronger, but is hard of hearing, short-sighted, and not an expert at sailing. On this ship the sailors argue over taking the captaincy, despite acknowledging that none of them have the proper training to be the captain. Many of them even claim that being a ship captain is an art that cannot be taught at all. Fighting ensues over who will succeed, and those who come closest are thrown overboard. Eventually the sailors disable the shipowner and rule the ship themselves, using up all of their stores of food and alcohol to celebrate, illustrating how none of them understand how to be a true captain and leader. (Plato, 488a-489a). In this allegory, Plato shows how when no one is trained to be a true leader, understanding the true nature of good and just, fighting ensues over who is best fitted to lead, and the ones who eventually win ruin society by their poor leadership. In the fight for the American presidency, for example, this allegory can be seen in the political debates.

In the election process, presidential debates are opportunities for voters to see the various candidates interact and compare the candidates' arguments on various controversial and relevant issues for the state. In these debates, candidates will argue and bicker over each other's views and opinions, often resorting to belittling one another, similar to the ways the sailors argued over who should take the captaincy. Furthermore, throughout the election process, candidates often try to find information that will make the other candidates look less presidential, and lower their chances of winning, similar to the ways the sailors would throw the other, more successful sailors overboard when their chances were higher of gaining the captaincy. With the similarities between the American presidential election process and Plato's allegory of the ship, it is clear Plato would not approve of the American presidency as a good representation of his ideal philosopher king.

To make the American presidential system resemble the institution of the philosopher-king would change the foundations of American democracy. American democracy prioritizes the votes of the citizens to ensure that leaders are someone the state population wants, even if it is not necessarily the person who has the most expertise. American presidents would need to be explicitly trained from an early age for the role to follow Plato's system, and this would mean presidents were not elected democratically as they are currently, but rather chosen from a young age to be a future leader. This system would likely mean that future presidents are separated from the general public to receive specialized training in leadership, virtue, and government the way Plato viewed his philosopher-kings' trainings. To do so would change the idea of American government being by citizens and for the citizens as leaders would not be living as the general public they would represent. While these changes would make the American presidency follow Plato's theory of the ideal system, it would violate the foundations and core beliefs of American democracy.

While Plato would view the institution of the American presidency as a poor representation of his ideal Philosopher King because the presidents have not been explicitly trained and educated to assume this role, to change the presidential system to follow Plato's ideal system would undermine the ideals of American democracy. At the founding and writing of the American Constitution, the Framers, setting up a new democracy, followed the example of Ancient Greek democracy, however, that system did not follow Plato's ideal society. Since the founding, many people have pointed out issues in the American political system and theorized different ways the system could be altered to provide better equality and representation for all. While there are many things about American politics that do demand change, changing the system to follow Plato's idea would not be the solution. While Plato's society does seem good in some ways, especially the emphasis on the importance of having leaders who are true experts in leadership, to do so would completely ignore the founding principles of the nation, and while some of those principles have proven to be problematic in recent years in terms of equality and justice, the very idea of American democracy that defines society would be forgotten in Plato's version.

### References

Plato (2004). *Republic* (C.D.C. Reeve, Trans.). Indianapolis. Hackett Publishing. (pp. 115-282).

Maier, Romulus. *The Republic III: Change and Happiness (Books 8 to 10)*: Slide 5 – 7.