**What is Aristotle's definition of a democracy?**

Aristotle conceives all things, including governments, in terms of a “telos”: a purpose. For Aristotle, if something achieves its telos then it is **virtuous**. Aristotle believes that the telos of a government, a constitution, should be the good life – it should lead to the happy and good life of its citizens. The city state democracy comes into being for the sake of life, but exists for the sake of the good life. The city-state’s telos is the good life of its citizens.

When Aristotle is defining different types of governments that could govern citizens, he divides them by **virtuous** or **non-virtuous** leaders.

For Aristotle, a democracy is the rule of the poor and the rule of the majority. When making his decision on virtuous or non-virtuous, Aristotle says that the rule or the majority does not help the city-state achieve its telos – the good life for its citizens. Therefore, Aristotle believes that a democracy is not a good form of rule.

**WHY?**

One reason a democracy does not achieve the telos of the city-state, and therefore cannot be a virtuous form of government, is because a democracy is based in a bad definition of freedom – according to Aristotle.

“Democracies define freedom badly*….everyone lives as he wants and toward whatever end he happens to crave*.” For Aristotle, this is a non-virtuous end.

A virtuous government would, instead of having everyone live as he wants and towards whatever end he wants, *have the government rule for the common good*. The common good, for Aristotle, is the telos of the city-state: providing the good life for its citizens.

Another reason that a democracy is not a virtuous form of government is rooted in a democracy’s concept of equality.

For Aristotle, “*a virtuous government is one that is ruled on the basis of merit*.” However, in a democracy, ruling is done on the basis of numerical equality. This means that everyone has a share in the ruling of the city-state.

Aristotle points out that if large groups of people get together to make decisions it is inevitable that their personal bias will appear, and the decisions will not be made for the virtue of the city-state. If the decisions are made by people who do not have the telos of the city-state at the core of their actions, then the telos of the city-state will never be reached, and the government will not be virtuous.

Aristotle believes that someone who is virtuous in ruling must be able to put the common good above their individual good.

However, for Aristotle, *“the poor are concerned with getting more wealth, which means they are putting their individual good above the common good while they are engaged in ruling.”*

The city-state is composed of more than the poor citizen; the city-state also has wealthy citizens. For a person to govern in a virtuous manner, they must be able to put the common good – the good of the city-state – above their individual good.

When the poor govern, as they do in a democracy, then the good of the city-state becomes the good of the poor, which is not the good of the city-state as a whole, and so does not reach the telos of the city-state.

Aristotle states that there are certain characteristics of a democracy and they are:

* eligibility of all citizens for office,
* offices that are chose by lot,
* no repeat terms in office,
* short terms of office,
* a popular jury, and
* a popular assembly with great authority.

In a democracy, all offices are paid. When all citizens are eligible for office, when offices are chosen by lot, and when there is a popular assembly with great authority, it is guaranteed that there will be non-virtuous people involved in governing.

These characteristics of a democracy tie back to the belief of equality – numerical equality. Aristotle believes in rule by merit. The rule based on numerical equality is in direct conflict with Aristotle’s belief in rule by merit. In a democracy, with the characteristics above, a non-virtuous person has an opportunity at rule, regardless of merit. This leads to a city-state that cannot attain its telos.

**CONCLUSIONS**

For Aristotle, democracy is a failure. It is a majority rule, where the majority is poor and non-virtuous. This means that whomever is in office, and all have equal access to office because of democracy’s concept of equality, may not act in the best interests of the city-state. When the city-state fails to reach its telos, providing the good life for its citizens, then the government of the city-state is non-virtuous, as are the people in the government.

Since the city-state fails to achieve its telos under a democracy, Aristotle believes democracy to be a failure.