

What the New Congress Can Learn From Aristotle

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COMMENTARY



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The swearing in of the 116th Congress next month returns divided government to Washington. A Democratic-controlled House coupled with a fortified Republican Senate majority is likely to exacerbate the rancor and vitriol that have suffused national politics since long before Donald Trump's theatrical announcement in the summer of 2015 that he was running for president.

Many on both sides take pride in assuming the worst about the opposition. The left bewails the onset of fascism in America. Yet Republicans have reduced the scope of government by cutting taxes and deregulating the economy. And rather than imposing American rule beyond the nation's borders, the president and his party have sought to bring immigration under the rule of law.

The right adopts a siege mentality and girds itself for total war against the left even though in 2019 the GOP will still control the presidency, the Senate, 26 governorships, and 62 of 97 state legislative chambers. Moreover, a majority of Supreme Court justices follow the late-Justice Antonin Scalia in believing that their task is to say what the Constitution means rather than what they believe it ought to mean. While the mainstream media regard conservatives as at best a curiosity to be tolerated, expressly conservative media have never been more prolific, lively, or varied.

The routine exaggeration, the reflexive resorting to sloganeering and invective, and the determined refusal to countenance alternative opinions leave partisans imprisoned within their cherished clichés and mesmerized by their pet panaceas. What is needed is a larger perspective, a suppler outlook, a more capacious sensibility.

What is needed is a generous dose of Aristotelian political science.

But doesn't Aristotle, writing in the twilight of classical Athenian greatness, proceed from a discredited conception of nature and human nature? Doesn't he subscribe to the illiberal and antidemocratic view that the purpose of politics is to cultivate virtue, a task to which only the one best regime is suited? Doesn't his defense of natural slavery and his subordination of women render his thinking offensive to contemporary sensibilities and irrelevant to contemporary politics?

Such questions provide an excellent introduction to Aristotle's political science, which takes as its point of departure prevailing opinions about morality and government. Aristotle does not, as many assert, organize his inquiries in the "Ethics" and the "Politics" around theoretical propositions about nature and human nature. Rather, he starts by considering citizens' contending beliefs about practical affairs -- happiness, character, wisdom, community and households, regimes, and claims about political justice. Aristotle's political science ascends to theoretical questions, but it does so by drawing out the hidden assumptions, the overlooked ambiguities, and neglected implications inhering in everyday suppositions and judgments.

Aristotle does argue that in the best case, politics would be devoted to the promotion of human excellence. But because his political science is in essence comparative and historical and therefore well-grounded in the possibilities and limitations of flesh-and-blood human beings, he also emphasizes that the best case is exceedingly rare. So rare that the best one can reasonably hope for, he concludes, is a mixed regime that combines the advantages of elite rule and popular rule while reining in the disadvantages of both. Such a regime presupposes citizens' freedom and equality; their differences of skills, task, and attainments; and their sharing in decision-making and ruling. The nearest modern equivalent would be a democracy that secures individual rights while providing room for ambition and merit to prosper. The United States is an outstanding example of such a liberal democracy.

Aristotle's defense of natural slavery is no bar to learning from his political science, especially since his definition of the natural slave as a human being incapable of exercising reason sets a standard that stood as a reproach to the slavery Athens countenanced. As for women, Aristotle's political science is perfectly compatible with -- indeed, it fosters attentiveness to -- changing opinions about who constitutes a citizen. And it directs the same question to contemporary liberal democracy that it would to the classical mixed regime: What are the factors that preserve and destroy it?

To answer that question, Aristotle shows, it is particularly important to bear in mind the crippling propensity of regimes, like those of the partisans within them, to take their principles to an extreme. His political sciences explores the partial justice of the rival principles and brings into focus the advantages that flow to the regime from giving each its due.

So, for example, Aristotelian political science rejects the false choice frequently posed today between populism and rule by elites. Instead, it would examine the legitimate claims of the people to govern themselves by choosing representatives to advance their concerns about their livelihood, families, and communities. And it would reconcile them in practice, to the extent possible, with the legitimate claims of experts, professionals, and those whose experience, character, and accomplishments enable them to discern the long-term requirements of the public interest.

In addition, Aristotelian political science denies that nationalism and liberal democracy are fundamentally incompatible. It also grasps that they are not a perfect match. Rooting political power in a shared language, history, faith, and sense of political destiny certainly can issue in authoritarian government and fuel conquest and domination. It all depends on what is shared. A nation-state constituted by a people bound by dedication to individual liberty, toleration of religious differences, and respect for self-reliant individuals and diverse communities is uniquely well-suited to cultivating liberal democracy.

Aristotelian political science provides an antidote to the utopian fantasies and the haughty self-regard that nourish contempt for the messy give-and-take, the inevitable posturing and puffery, the unending imperfection of everyday politics. It factors into its assessments the grandeur of true statesmen as well as their scarcity. It heightens awareness of the genuine errors and costs of liberal democracy in America without obscuring the splendid achievements and many blessings of liberal democracy in America.

Aristotelian political science places education in the regime's mores, laws, and principles at the center of the institutions that preserve regimes. For a liberal democracy that means liberal education, an education that springs from and revolves around the modern tradition of freedom, and therefore extends not only to the criticisms, but also to the advantages, of Aristotelian political science.

And an Aristotelian political science recognizes that without that concord or pre-political sense of a common undertaking – including where the undertaking is limited to securing the rights shared equally by all -- citizens will lack that element of magnanimity when their political preferences prevail (and graciousness when they don't) on which the rule of law and constitutional self-government depend.

You could say that these admonitions, rules of thumb, and counsels of prudence show that Aristotelian political science is nothing very fancy or particularly scientific, that it consists in large measure of refined common sense, subtly calibrated judgment, and supple accommodation. But as the advent of the 116th Congress approaches, what is in shorter supply in the nation's politics? And what ought to be in greater demand?

This article draws on remarks delivered Monday at a Hoover Institution conference titled "From Athens to America: Democracy and Political Science."

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