

# Obey the public will



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ABOUT 2,500 years ago, the adult male citizens of the ancient Greek city-state could speak their minds via an assembly within a political system known as direct democracy. Aristotle, due to the plausibility of a democracy falling under the tyranny of the majority, had opposed democracy as the worst form of government

Nonetheless, Aristotle did not witness another form of democracy, which is the representative democracy. In the modern era, we started to adopt representative democracy, simply because human population has grown extensively and thus it requires representatives to represent our voice in the parliament. Hence, this new form of democracy has to a huge extent eliminated the possibility of the tyranny of majority from taking place since the elected representatives are ought to be rational persons that should be able to differentiate between right and wrong.

The point is, within a democratic political system, Aristotle and our modern world recognised that as citizens of a state, it is imperative for our voice to be heard by the authority for us to live in a virtuous polity. It is said that Voltaire, the French Enlightenment thinker, had even gone further in defending the citizens' right to have their say, as reflected in the famous adage, "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it".

Therefore there should be no more fear of the so-called tyranny of majority. However, there are leaders who are still "afraid" of such majoritarian threat. Perhaps the reason is because of the feeling of overconfidence over his or her own judgement, making them to look down on the capability of other non-executive parliamentarians, hence the rest of the citizens in making important decisions. Maybe they are actually trying to leverage on such "fear" too. Thus, in the name of "saving" the country, these "statesmen" or "stateswomen" may have excused themselves when they embraced a Machiavellian virtù, a privilege bestowed upon state leaders to act against the common virtues upheld by the people.

Niccolò Machiavelli, the Italian Renaissance political theorist, had differentiated between the concept of *virtù* and virtue. The former is solely privileged to state leaders as justification for their “wise” statecraft even if it means to go against the generally expected norms. This is because according to Machiavelli, the virtues applied on them are different and “higher” than the ones burdened on the citizens. Thus, to silence the voice of the masses in order to impede the “tyranny” of majority is a “virtuous” move.

Nonetheless, these leaders may want to consider the flip side of the tyranny of majority, which is the concept of general will. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, another 18th-century French political theorist, had talked about the importance of general will as a form of governance. For without the general will no regime is legitimate. General will prioritises the general interest of the citizens over the personal interest of the individual. This is because the general interest of the citizens is more important as it will ensure the stability and legitimacy of the society.

Hence, these “statespeople”, as part of the citizens of the country, should be ready to put aside their personal interests and start to listen to the voice of the majority of the people for the benefit of the society as a whole. Friedrich A. Hayek, the Austrian political economist, might have been right when he said that the government would never be able to outwit the citizens, simply because the citizenry have more countable brains than the individuals that constitute the executive of the government. – July 27, 2021.

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