



**CALIFORNIA CONTENT  
STANDARD 10.1.2**

## *Western Political Ideas of Tyranny*

**Specific Objective:** Trace the development of Western political ideas of rule of law and illegitimacy of tyranny, using selections from Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Politics*.

**Read the summary to answer the questions on the next page.**

In ancient Greece, the word **tyrant** was used for any leader who took over a government. A tyrant typically won public support and then seized power. Only later did tyrant come to mean what it does today—a leader who takes power illegally and abuses that power.

Tyranny in ancient Greece could be seen as a step toward democracy because a tyrant often gained power with support of the people, while a king, for instance, did not. However, like a king, a tyrant held all of the power himself.

Ancient Greek thinkers known as **philosophers** (“lovers of wisdom”) often considered how different forms of government, including tyranny, affected society. In *The Republic*, the philosopher **Plato** wrote that a tyrant becomes troublesome when he loves his power so much that he takes drastic measures to maintain it:

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“At first, in the early days of his power, [the tyrant] is full of smiles . . . [but later] he is always stirring up some war or other, in order that the people may require a leader.”

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—Plato, *The Republic*

In Plato’s view, a central reason that a tyrant becomes a problem is that the ruler has too much freedom—freedom to do whatever he or she likes, without regard for law or reason. As a result, the ruler can become a danger to the people.

Plato’s famous student, **Aristotle**, said that not only does a tyrant have too much power, but acts selfishly, ultimately acting against the will and the benefit of the people. Aristotle wrote, in *Politics*, that tyranny:

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“. . . is just that arbitrary power of an individual which is responsible to no one, and governs all . . . with a view to its own advantage, not to that of its subjects, and therefore against their will.”

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—Aristotle, *Politics*

The influence of ancient Greek philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, extended beyond their time. Because they used logic and reason to think about the world and debate new ideas, they created a spirit of questioning and choice that aided the development of **democracy**.



**PRACTICE**

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# *Western Political Ideas of Tyranny*

**Directions:** Choose the letter of the *best* answer.

- 1 In ancient Greece, the word *tyrant* referred to a leader who**
  - A took over the government.
  - B ruled with cruelty.
  - C lost the support of the people.
  - D wanted to become a king.
  
- 2 According to ancient Greek philosophers, with whom did a tyrant share power?**
  - A the people
  - B the aristocracy
  - C a group of philosophers
  - D nobody
  
- 3 What was the primary activity of a philosopher in ancient Greece?**
  - A criticizing the government
  - B thinking about natural laws
  - C working toward democracy
  - D reforming the laws
  
- 4 Plato wrote that a tyrant can become dangerous because every tyrant has too much**
  - A freedom to rule.
  - B material wealth.
  - C popular support.
  - D interest in war.
  
- 5 According to Aristotle, why does a tyrant govern against the will of the people?**
  - A Tyrants take power illegally.
  - B The people wish to rebel against a tyrant.
  - C The tyrant is primarily self-interested.
  - D Many people ruled by the tyrant are slaves.
  
- 6 Ancient Greek philosophers helped the development of democracy by**
  - A expanding definitions of citizenship.
  - B ending the rule of the tyrants.
  - C writing a basic set of fair laws.
  - D promoting reason and thought.