

# Civic Engagement: Perspectives on Active Citizen Participation in Political Life

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## **Abstract**

This paper was originally written for Dr. Laurent Dobuzinkis' POL 210 course *Introduction to Political Philosophy*. The assignment asked students to choose a question from a provided list and form a well-researched stance, analyzing the philosophies of various political thinkers. The paper uses Chicago citation style.

Citizen participation in politics is a relevant topic which connects to social matters and impacts decision-making and laws within society. This subject harbours a rich history, ranging back to ancient philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, and has continued to evolve. Thinkers like Hobbes, Plato, and Nozick were dubious of civic engagement for reasons such as absolute sovereign authority and citizens' predetermined societal positions. Conversely, Rousseau and Aristotle advocated for citizen participation with the rationales of the common good and collective deliberation being effective, since man has a natural aptitude for politics. Regardless, there are historical nuances to each outlook and to develop an opinion one must thoroughly examine the complex beliefs of each individual.

## **Introduction**

Arguments in favour of citizens' active participation in political life have a long history, ranging from Ancient Greek philosophers to one of the 18th century's most significant political thinkers. Some critics are dubious of this idea and believe that desiring too much from citizens' political engagement should be avoided. Political participation encompasses the actions of the public in making decisions that will influence their future by either electing state leaders or directly involving themselves in the political process. It has been an important debate throughout history in which many philosophers and other scholars have participated. In earlier years, the notion of political involvement was connected to citizenship,

followed by the invention of the social contract when it became a component of the devised agreements. Many well-known thinkers make an effort to establish their ideal state as part of their political philosophy, and civic engagement is a fundamental aspect of a society which must always be addressed.

Political participation nowadays is more crucial than ever. It is a way for ordinary people to make enormous changes by communicating their values and beliefs, demanding representation and equality, and fighting for what they believe in. Political efficacy has been declining in certain areas but social activist movements are flourishing in others, and there are many factors that can play a part in the degree of active participation from citizens in political life. Regardless, there is consistently the question of if civic engagement is beneficial or not.

This paper will assess the works of several philosophers who have provided their perspectives on this issue. Beginning with Aristotle and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, it will describe their approval of citizens' active participation in politics and the reason for their opinions. This will be followed by a passage defining what Aristotle and Rousseau viewed as a citizen, something necessary for a comprehensive dialogue on this topic. The third section will focus on those against civic engagement and critically examine the writings of Thomas Hobbes and Plato, finishing off by touching on Robert Nozick's ideas. It will conclude by using the gathered information to take a position on the topic, along with clarification as to why.

### **Those in Favour of Citizens' Active Political Participation**

The ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle, was one of many notable thinkers to endorse the active participation of citizens in political life. He felt that an individual's satisfaction is closely connected to being a citizen of a well-run state. Additionally, humans possess the capacity to reason and deliberate and in determining that, Aristotle believed "politics is natural to man"<sup>1</sup> and "encourages a citizen to participate fully in his own community."<sup>2</sup> He declared that man is a "political animal" and "naturally fitted for the life of the polis"<sup>3</sup> for the aforementioned reasons. Aristotle's renowned term "telos" alludes to a person's

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<sup>1</sup> Roberts, Peri, and Peter Sutch. 2012. *An Introduction to Political Thought: A Conceptual Toolkit*. 2nd ed. Edinburgh University Press. 47.

<sup>2</sup> Roberts, Peri, and Peter Sutch. 2012. *An Introduction to Political Thought: A Conceptual Toolkit*. 2nd ed. Edinburgh University Press. 58.

<sup>3</sup> Mulgan, Richard. 1990. "Aristotle and the Value of Political Participation." *Political Theory* 18 (2). 196.

final goal or purpose. Each person is to become virtuous in their own designated way, but the telos of ordinary citizens in particular is to become virtuous, participative citizens. By partaking in politics and employing their ability to reason, Aristotle thought that humans could further expand their ethical virtues. In fact, he did not regard a person as a citizen without said participation. In his book *The Politics*, Aristotle wrote that “as soon as a man becomes entitled to participate in office, deliberative or judicial, we deem him to be a citizen of that state,”<sup>4</sup> thus implying that one ought to participate in the political process to become a full citizen.

All citizens should participate in political life by ruling and being ruled in turn. They should order accountability from those in power and be immersed in the deliberative process to succeed in fulfilling their telos. Even “the verb *polithesthai* [which means] “to be a citizen,” [means], more specifically, “to be active in managing the affairs of the city.”<sup>5</sup> Since quality of character and ethics were so closely tied to political participation for Aristotle, he was a firm believer in both civic and virtue education. He hoped for knowledge to be taught regarding how to fulfill one’s role in society and live a virtuous life, and this education contributed to political participation.

The second prominent philosopher known to support the participation of citizens in political life was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose notion of the “general will” was a driving factor of his support. Rousseau expressed that the general will is a collective interest in the common good enforced by the people through submission to the vision and virtuous activity such as voting. Since “the sovereign is formed solely of the private individuals who make it up, [it] cannot have any interest contrary to theirs.”<sup>6</sup> Though individuals may have their own ideas, they should surrender to the common will and settle on how they are governed for society’s sake. He stressed that the state must protect the rights of its citizens and that citizens needed to participate in order to ensure their well-being was kept in mind.

His thinking had a democratic influence in the way that he believed in a majority rule of sorts. Rousseau articulated throughout his various writings that

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<sup>4</sup> Aristotle. 1981. *The Politics*. Penguin Classics. 171.

<sup>5</sup> Mulgan, Richard. 1990. “Aristotle and the Value of Political Participation.” *Political Theory* 18 (2). 196.

<sup>6</sup> Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 2012. *The Major Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Two “Discourses” and the “Social Contract”*. Translated by John T. Scott. The University of Chicago Press. 123.

“rule by the people in the broadest sense of the term as active, influential, and practically meaningful participation in lawmaking even when experts set the agenda”<sup>7</sup> is indeed achievable. A section in his book *The Social Contract* reads that “the people subject to the laws should be their author [and] it belongs only to those who are forming an association to regulate the conditions of the society.”<sup>8</sup> To ensure that the common good is being protected, citizens are encouraged to actively participate in political life, even to the extent of overthrowing authority they feel does not accurately represent the general will. Similar to Aristotle, Rousseau acknowledged the value of civic education to promote the common good and teach civic virtues or responsibilities.

### Defining “Citizen”

An essential distinction to make when discussing the topic of citizen participation in politics is what constitutes a “citizen.” Though it has been defined that Aristotle viewed citizens as men who can partake in political deliberation, he truly meant only men— not humans. Aristotle’s ideas were incredibly hierarchical, and like many philosophers of that time, excluded women from certain things. He wrote primarily about men and there was no reason to think he would have welcomed an extension to women when it came to the responsibilities of participating in the polis. Moreover, he declared that “mere residence in a place [does not] confer citizenship: resident foreigners and slaves are not citizens,”<sup>9</sup> meaning slaves were barred from total citizenship and could not participate in politics either. Aristotle thought that the ability to pass judgement which characterized an individual as a full citizen could not be found in certain people because “the deliberative faculty in the soul is not present at all in a slave; in a female it is present but ineffective, in a child present but undeveloped.”<sup>10</sup> He deemed that children “are too immature to vote [and] women would be disqualified because they do not have the capacity to command; their telos is

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<sup>7</sup> Putterman, Ethan. 2003. “Rousseau on Agenda-Setting and Majority Rule.” *The American Political Science Review* 97 (3). 459.

<sup>8</sup> Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 2012. *The Major Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Two “Discourses” and the “Social Contract”*. Translated by John T. Scott. The University of Chicago Press. 135.

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle. 1981. *The Politics*. Penguin Classics.169.

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle. 1981. *The Politics*. Penguin Classics. 95.

satisfied in the household,”<sup>11</sup> and believed only men were permitted to properly use the power of speech and engage in politics.

Unfortunately, Rousseau was not any more accepting of women in politics. His definition of a citizen was looser and centered around a commitment to the general will. While he did believe in equality, he held a few contradictory views that indicated he did not agree with women participating in political life such as suggesting they need to depend on men for a rationality they can not possess. Most of these misogynistic opinions are contained in his novel *Emile*, which portrays females as subservient to males.

This is necessary to point out because one can not entirely agree with either of these philosophers on their thoughts of citizen participation in political life without considering who they viewed as a full citizen or believed could participate. Even currently, there are places where women’s rights to political participation are severely limited. These injustices continue in countries like Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Brunei, and Vatican City, where it is difficult or downright banned for women to vote. Women’s perspectives in politics are crucial within our patriarchal society, and equality is still being fought for each day.

### **Those Opposed to Citizens’ Active Political Participation**

Those who disagree with the concept that citizens should contribute to politics have varying reasons as to why. To comprehend Thomas Hobbes’ argument surrounding citizens’ political engagement, one must first understand his state of nature and depiction of the sovereign. Influential English philosopher Hobbes believed that humans are self-centered creatures, naturally at war with one another. He thought life would be brief and barbaric with no ethical authority to conduct the people, and as a result, his social contract was born. Hobbes’ social contract states that people must give up their freedoms for protection from the sovereign, and the sovereign’s power is absolute. This authority, contrary to Rousseau’s, can not be contested or abolished. Since a human’s innate condition was to be selfish and vicious, he urged that it would be inappropriate for them to participate in political life. In his work *Leviathan*, Hobbes conveys that it is the job of the sovereign to “be judge of what opinions and doctrines are averse, and what conducing to peace; and consequently, on what occasions, how far, and what men

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<sup>11</sup> Roberts, Peri, and Peter Sutch. 2012. *An Introduction to Political Thought: A Conceptual Toolkit*. 2nd ed. Edinburgh University Press. 61.

are to be trusted withal in speaking to multitudes of people,”<sup>12</sup> giving it the license to oversee everything including the beliefs of the people. While he does not explicitly oppose citizen participation, the arguments derived from his texts strongly hint at it. If the sovereign is strong and unlimited, it will effectively maintain control without the need for citizen assistance.

Plato was another philosopher who defied active involvement in politics by citizens. He believed that a just society could only be achieved when there is peace between the different social classes and each individual accepts their assigned role without attempt to be something more. Since people are divided into groups such as warriors, labourers, and rulers, they must be committed to their designated virtues. He claims that regular citizens should not desire to rule, and should leave ruling to those with the suitable qualities to do so. Philosopher kings have the utmost power in Plato’s ideal state. These men were his perfect image of political authority as they possess many philanthropic attributes and retain exceptional knowledge. In a dialogue between Adeimantus and Socrates in Plato’s *Republic*, democracy was debated. It was reasoned that “extreme freedom probably cannot lead to anything but a change to extreme slavery”<sup>13</sup> and that democratic regimes are ultimately disorderly. He considers the rule of the many dangerous and unstable and eventually decides that philosopher kings are the only ones capable and wise enough to partake in politics.

Lastly, right-libertarian American philosopher Robert Nozick was extremely opposed to the engagement of citizens in politics. Yet, his arguments are somewhat less relevant because he proposed a minimal state where individuals could pursue their own goals, whatever they may be. The citizens of Nozick’s ideal state are free to take part in any transactions with each other and should be allowed to handle their own property, and government interference in either of those rules would be an infringement upon their liberty. Likewise to Plato, he has some criticisms of democracy. Nozick thought that if the masses were encouraged to vote or participate in politics beyond just abiding by regulations, they would use the state to take resources away from the minority and redistribute them to themselves. For the most part, these three philosophers had diverse views on democracy and different reasons as to why the citizens of a state should not be expected to participate in political life, but all were adamant about their stance.

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<sup>12</sup> Hobbes, Thomas. 1651. *Leviathan*. 109-110.

<sup>13</sup> Plato. 2004. *Republic*. Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing Company, Incorporated. Accessed March 28, 2023. ProQuest Ebook Central. 262.

**Conclusion**

Taking into account each philosopher's distinctive outlook on civic engagement, the most realistic and reasonable conclusion to draw is that the active participation of citizens in political life is not only beneficial but vital.

Hobbes, Plato, and Nozick were doubtful of it for a few reasons. Hobbes believed people needed an absolute authority to govern them and prevent a war from erupting due to their corrupt human nature, and that the social contract could not be revised under any circumstance. He believed that merely abiding by the laws of the sovereign was all citizens should do. Plato argued that citizens should not be expected to do more than what is required of them within their assigned societal role and that only philosopher-kings have the ability to rule or partake in politics. Nozick denied the need for a systematized state altogether and thought individuals would always act in their own best interest when it came to acquiring resources. Some of these arguments may have had merit at the time they were written, but society is moving past restricting people to stereotypes or dampening their potential due to societal labels as Plato believed in. Though the true nature of a human's intentions will forever be up for debate, assuming they will act selfishly like Hobbes or Nozick is not reason enough to prohibit citizens from contributing to politics.

Aristotle fully supported the participation of citizens in political life, to the extent that his definition of a citizen was a man who can engage in political or judicial deliberation. Aside from his misogynistic views, Aristotle was surprisingly modern about certain matters like recognizing that different countries have their own faiths or socio-economic situations and not every place can be managed the same, as well as promoting equal-access education. Education is a major part of political participation and equips young adults with the tools they will need to be informed citizens when voting. Civic education was something both Rousseau and Plato supported, and this is fantastic because individuals with more education on the importance of civic engagement are more likely to participate.

Rousseau's main argument for civic engagement was that it is needed for upholding the general will, or the common good. He believed that citizens required a government that would protect the common good of society and had their best interests at heart. His argument is the most valid and applicable to our society now, as democracy is consistently regarded as leading to more equal and inclusive societies.

When the people can vote for who they want to put in power, they can ensure political and social problems are addressed correctly and their values are

being taken into consideration. It is extremely important to participate in politics in any way one can, from exercising the right to vote to engaging in activism to advocate for different issues. By engaging in politics through voting, enlightening others, or something else, one can greatly contribute to the outcomes of significant laws or legislations. These can be about many meaningful issues, like education, healthcare, or public safety. Citizens must continue to participate in political life for a better future where their well-being is defended and their values are the highest priority.

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