



The full title of *Utopia* suggests that the text will explore the same question posed in More's epigram no. 198, "What is the best form of government?" This perennial question of political philosophy begins with the consideration of who should govern – one, few, or many? The answer to this question shapes the "regime" or arrangement of offices in a constitution. Classical political philosophy recognizes several categories of regimes, including monarchy (the rule of one), aristocracy (the rule of a select few), and democracy (the rule of the many, or the people). The Roman tradition adds to these categories the idea of a "republic" (from the Latin *res publica*, or "public things"), in which rulers hold office on the basis of some form of election rather than inheritance and are presumed to rule for a limited time on behalf of the whole. This common good was thought to be best achieved by means of liberty under law, and by the statesmanship of a leading citizen or princeps who considers himself "first among equals." Many Renaissance humanists strove to approximate these standards in their own time.

According to classical categories, Utopia is a mixed regime.¹

- Utopia is **democratic** in the popular election of phylarchs.
- Utopia is **republican** in the phylarchs' election of the *princeps* or "governor."
- Utopia is **aristocratic** in that the major positions are limited to the scholar class.
- Utopia is **monarchical** in the governor's ability to hold office for a lifetime.

The Utopian Population

- There are 6000 households in each city and each household has 10-16 adults, with the oldest ruling.
- There are 60,000 - 96,000 citizens in each city, excluding slaves, farmers, and children. Including the latter groups brings the total population of each city to about 100,000 people.²
- There are over 3000 slaves in each city.³ Many are former citizens, but considerable numbers are bought or brought into Utopia. Popular vote can remit slavery.
- Each rural household has at least 40 men and women and 2 slaves.

Political Offices in Utopia

- 1 *princeps*, or "governor," elected for life from the scholar class. 200 sypbogrants vote by secret ballot from the four nominees elected by the people and accepted by senate (178/26-37).⁴ The governor works with the senate every day on public matters and private disputes. He can lighten or remit punishments.
- 20 *protophylarchs/tranibors*, the senate, elected annually from the scholar class (178/37-8). The senate serves legislative and executive functions, and acts as a judiciary for authorizing suicide and divorce (196/55-6).
- 200 *phylarchs/sypbogrants*, elected annually by 30 households from the whole citizenry (178/19-22). They are "exempted from work" but generally work in order to "motivate others to work by giving a good example" (180/76-81). Their "chief function" is to prevent laboring citizens from shirking their duties, but they also represent households in the senate (179/51-5, 178/61-4).
- 1 *magistratibus urbanis*, or town manager, freely gives away city surplus and assigns the number of town folk needed for harvest. He is the one, for example, who "very often...decree[s] a shorter workday" (181/65).
- 13 *priests*, including one high priest. They are elected by secret ballot of the people unless appointed during war time. They supervise education and public morals and are not subject to the rule of law (206/42-57, 87-90).
- 300 *scholars*, who are eligible to become ambassadors, priests, tranibors, or governor (180/92-181/1).
- 1 *general council* for the whole island is composed of 3 representatives from each city (175/75-7).
- Utopians also serve as *magistrates* for other countries (198/17).
- *Secret agents* work in enemy countries and serve as assassins (200).
- *Collectors of revenue* manage conquered estates abroad and live "in grand style and play the part of great lords" (203/18-19).

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¹ In Book 6 of the *Politics* Aristotle recommends a prudent mixing of each of the different regime types in order to achieve a balance resulting in the "best practical regime." Because each regime type is prone to its own extremes, it should be blended with its opposite in order to achieve a practical mean. This ideal was promoted in the Roman republic by Polybius and embraced by Cicero and, later, by Thomas Aquinas.

² London at the time was roughly 60,000 people.

³ In each city, at least 2000 serve in the eating halls and 1000 serve as butchers and in markets and for travel carts: in each of the eating halls, slaves do the dirty and heavy chores (183/35-36); all the butchers and hunters are slaves (191/31-3); one slave drives each travel cart (184/47); two slaves are bound to each rural household (176/14-5). There are, then, over 165,000 slaves in Utopia.

⁴All officials are elected by a secret ballot (178/29, 206/51-3).

Rules for the prevention of tyranny and corruption:

- 2 syphogrants are invited to audit all senate proceedings and to make recommendations. The auditors rotate each day; on “matters of great moment” they assemble and report to the households they represent (178/48-50; 60-4).
- Each measure is discussed for 3 days before a decision is reached (178/50-4).
- It is a capital crime to scheme about the affairs of state outside of the assembly (178/54-6).
- Measures are not discussed on the same day they are proposed; they are put off until the next meeting to encourage rational deliberation (178/67–179/5).
- Anyone who campaigns for office is disqualified from holding office (197/46-8).

Questions to Consider:

1. How effective is the Utopian constitution in preserving liberty in Utopia?
2. How does the overall structure of Utopian government compare to epigram no. 198?
3. Which of the regime types appears to dominate in Utopia?
4. Does any particular group in Utopia benefit more than the others?
5. Would you want to live in Utopia? Why or why not?