

Did machiavelli feel  
that autocracy was  
the best form of  
government?



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At first thought, this question seems simple enough. After all, Nicolo Machiavelli did more or less write an “autocrat’s handbook” when he authored *The Prince*. In this text, Machiavelli explains how an autocrat rises to power, when an autocrat can best rise to power, and how an autocrat retains power. So going by this, it would seem that Machiavelli is very much a supporter of the autocratic system. In fact, this question seems to be all but put to rest during the last chapter of *The Prince*, in which Machiavelli calls for a strong ruler for Italy, and even goes as far to say Italy is primed for such a ruler to take power, as he calls on Lorenzo de’ Medici to become prince to save Italy from its constant invasions. However, when one begins to look more closely at *The Prince*, Machiavelli’s support for autocracy seems to be much less than one might first think. As early as chapter two, *Concerning Hereditary Principalities*, Machiavelli begins to paint the picture that autocratic governance may not be the best form of government. Near the end of the chapter, Machiavelli states that “...one change always leaves the door open for another” (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch. 2, p. 2). This could be interpreted as simply stating that any change in governance gives way to later change; however, as he clearly states in the first line of the chapter, he is speaking strictly of principalities so this may well be read as a comment on the instability of autocracy. The first solid statement which shows that Machiavelli sees the benefits of the republic can be seen in chapter three, *Concerning Mixed Principalities*. In this chapter, the most revealing statement in support of the republic is very brief, but revealing all the same. In this passage, Machiavelli speaks of the subjugation of newly acquired lands (Ch. 3, p. 2). Now I say that those dominions which, when acquired, are added to an ancient state by him who acquires them, are either of the same

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country and language, or they are not. When they are, it is easier to hold them, especially when they have not been accustomed to self-governance... This last line is incredibly important as it would lead one to believe that a self-governed state (i. e. NOT an autocracy) is more difficult to subdue, and as such, would lead one to believe that it might be more stable than another principality. This can be supported when Machiavelli goes on to say (Ch. 3, p. 2):...to hold [the newly acquired land] securely it is enough to have destroyed the family of the prince who was ruling them. This would not be possible in a republic, and this was a fact Machiavelli was very aware of. The prime chapter to look at when examining Machiavelli's feelings on autocracy vs. republic is chapter five, Concerning the Way to Govern Cities or Principalities. In this chapter, Machiavelli goes on to explain how to rule a conquered republic. He offeres three options for the aspiring autocrat, one, ruin them, two, reside there in person in order to exact control, or three, allow them to continue living under their own laws by setting up a friendly oligarchy within the current system and simply draw tribute. This chapter is very interesting in that it is one of the few times in the book that Machiavelli actually speaks of the republic itself, albeit only briefly. Whilst Machiavelli is only speaking about the republic as a victim of expansion or as a newly acquired territory, he makes no secret that the republic may well be the more stable, and hence better, form of government, as can be seen in the following excerpt (Ch. 5, p. 8).... when cities or countries are accustomed to live under a prince, and his family exterminated, they, being on the one hand accustomed to obey and on the other hand not having the old prince, cannot agree on making one from amongst themselves, and they do not know how to govern themselves. For this reason they are very slow to take up arms,

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and a prince can gain them to himself and secure them much more easily. But in republics there is more vitality, greater hatred, and more desire for vengeance, which will never permit them to allow the memory of their former liberty to rest...This statement alone gives a very good glimpse of Machiavelli's own feelings on the subject of governance. It shows very obviously that Machiavelli feels that republics derive their power in a much more direct way from the people and as such, the people are much more willing to fight for their kingdom. Seeing as Machiavelli sees loyalty and strong military might as signs of stability, it would lead us to believe that Machiavelli, if not preferring republics to autocracies, at very least he had much respect for them and did not see them as less stable. This can be further supported as one goes on to chapter nine, Concerning A Civil Principality. Here, it is clear that Machiavelli prefers a government system based upon the will of the people, as can be seen in the following excerpt (Ch. 9, p. 16). He who obtains sovereignty by the assistance of the nobles maintains himself with more difficulty than he who comes to it by the aid of the people...Even more so can this be seen a little further into this paragraph (Ch. 9, p. 16).... One cannot by fair dealing, and without injury to others, satisfy the nobles, but you can satisfy the people, for their object is more righteous than that of the nobles, the latter wishing to oppress, whilst the former only desire not to be oppressed. It is to be added also that a prince can never secure himself against a hostile people, because of their being too many, whilst from the nobles he can secure himself, as they are few in number. While this does not necessarily show a direct support for the republican system, it does however show a definite change from tradition autocratic ideology. Machiavelli applies the idea of government deriving

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power from the consent of the governed, a main point in the republic. The question of whether Machiavelli felt that autocracy was the best form of government, as it turns out, seems to be a definite no. It is apparent that Machiavelli felt that autocracy was a form of government, and albeit he felt it was a good one, if worked properly. However, it would seem by simply analyzing *The Prince* and how he speaks of the autocratic systems in respect to republics; it would seem that he stresses very well that a republic is just as, if not more, stable than an autocracy, and is a just as good, if not better, form of governance.\* All Cited passages are from *The Prince* by Nicolo Machiavelli, as translated by W. K. Mariott.