

# Niccolo machiavelli's book, the prince: the modern politics

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## **Modern Political Ideas in Machiavelli's The Prince**

Machiavelli's *The Prince* presents many political ideas that are still relevant in modern politics. He argues on topics such as whether it's better to be loved or feared, whether to be generous or stingy, and how virtue can be manipulated. Machiavelli references well known figures of literature and history to drive several of his points such as Caesar, Achilles, and Alexander VI. Although these essays from *The Prince* were meant to serve as advice for princes back in Machiavelli's day, he presents political ideas that are aligned with modern conservatives, and these ideas are still very much seen today.

One of Machiavelli's arguments is that it is better to be stingy than to be generous. Although he agrees that liberality can earn you a good reputation, "the generosity that earns you that reputation can do you great harm" (1610). He argues that a prince with the reputation of liberality will "immediately be labelled a miser" if he decides to stop his generous ways (1610). He also believes that it is not in the public interest for a prince to be generous, because this will result in higher taxes in order to fund the prince's donations, while a more stingy prince is able to keep taxes down because he isn't spending as much. As such, Machiavelli believes that stinginess, not generosity, will ultimately give you a reputation of generosity. The two sides of this argument—liberality and stinginess—can be easily aligned with modern liberal and conservative beliefs, respectively. Machiavelli's idea of donating money and being generous very much resembles a liberal tax plan—higher taxes that fund welfare programs, which provide for the poor. Machiavelli, however, aligns himself with a more conservative tax plan,

believing that higher taxes will “ rob his subjects,” and lower taxes are for the greater good (1611). Machiavelli does seem to have strong support for conservative economics, and this is an idea still applies today.

Another topic that Machiavelli covers is whether it's better to be feared or loved. He explains that it is better to be feared, because men will serve a prince that they love “ so long as the danger is remote” (1612). However, Machiavelli continues, “ when the danger is close at hand, they turn against you” (1612). Machiavelli strongly believes that it is better to be feared than to be loved, but he also makes a big point on being feared but not hated. He says that a prince can avoid hate by keeping his hands off of his citizens' property and shedding blood only when necessary. Here it is clear that Machiavelli is in support of the death penalty, but he says that it should only be carried out with “ a strong justification and manifest cause” (1612). However, Machiavelli doesn't provide any more elaboration on what would be such an act that can be justified with the death penalty. This is where the debate still lies today, as there are many different perspectives on where to draw the lines between the crimes that are punishable by death and those that are not. This debate involves many different variables, including the age and mental state of the criminal, the context of the situation, and plenty of other factors. However, there is a larger debate on whether or not to even have a death penalty at all, and it is clear that Machiavelli is in support of such a penalty. Machiavelli's own justification of the death penalty as a punishment is that “ men are quicker to forget the death of a father than the loss of a patrimony” (1613). Perhaps property was worth much more back in

Machiavelli's time, but this idea that life is worth less than property may not apply in today's society. Nonetheless, Machiavelli continues to align himself with the modern conservative in asserting his belief in a death penalty.

There are some non-partisan ideas that Machiavelli presents in his essays. Machiavelli says that it is not worthwhile actually being virtuous, a prince only needs to appear virtuous to his subjects. This is because he believes a prince "cannot possibly exercise all those virtues for which men are called 'good'" (1614). A prince must be willing to "do things against his word" sometimes in order for his own best interest and the best interest of his state. Machiavelli also claims that princes should only keep their word when it is their best interest. He says that "a prince will never lack for legitimate excuses to explain away his breaches of faith" (1614). He essentially says that a prince must be a great liar, because "men are so simple of mind, and so much dominated by their immediate needs, that a deceitful man will always find plenty who are ready to be deceived" (1614). These two points—on appearing virtuous and keeping promises—are very much an issue in modern politics. Almost every politician in office has broken promises before, and the president gets the most flack for not keeping their word. Many politicians do their best to appear virtuous, despite having a skeleton in the closet. Some politicians have gone out of their way, lying and performing unethical acts in order to hide some "non-virtuous" acts of their past. Notable examples of this would be Nixon and the Watergate Scandal, or Clinton and Monica Lewinsky, but these are examples where their efforts have failed. Machiavelli's ideas about lying and appearing virtuous are also

seen on presidential debates. Each candidate will try to expose the others and find cases where someone has gone back on their promises, but each candidate accused of lying will always manage up an excuse or counterclaim, and in the end, one of them will end up in office.

Machiavelli's timeless ideas in *The Prince* are still very much relevant in the modern political scene. He presents his thoughts on whether it's better to be stingy or generous, and whether it's better to be loved or feared. Through these essays, Machiavelli comes off as what would be considered a modern conservative. His thoughts on lying and virtuosity are still a major concern with modern politicians, because most of them are seasoned deception artists trying to appear more virtuous than they actually are. Machiavelli has surpassed the boundaries of time with his political ideas, and despite writing about how a prince should run his kingdom, many of his beliefs are still held with the politicians that run their countries.