**Critical Thinking and Democracy**

Democracy cannot function well without citizens who can think for themselves and keep an open mind. Another term for that is critical thinking, the process of carefully collecting and analyzing information, putting it together with logic and maintaining a healthy skepticism. Those who learn how to do it can use their skills to analyze voter information and political ideas objectively and logically.

Without a big majority of citizens who can think that way, the population of a democracy becomes more susceptible to manipulation and propaganda and vulnerable to demagogues and charlatans. Worst of all, a population without enough critical thinkers cannot hold those in power accountable to the people. Without them, a democracy is in trouble and might even crash.

In simpler terms, critical thinking involves:

* Asking questions and not just taking information at face value.
* Analyzing information by breaking down complex ideas, identifying key components, and understanding how they relate to each other while being alert to contradictions.
* Evaluating evidence presented by the media or candidates by considering its credibility, relevance, and whether it has enough evidence to support its claims.
* Identifying biases…your own and that of others.
* Considering multiple perspectives and looking at issues from various angles, including those that are out of your comfort zone.
* Forming reasoned judgments by using simple tools of basic logic to reach conclusions that are based on sound reasoning instead of emotion or prejudice.
* Being on the lookout for problems, contradictions and implications when evaluating ideas and policies.

If we take a deeper dive into how critical thinking functions in a democracy, we reach the conclusion that democracy cannot do without it since democracy is a form of government that is rooted in the consent of the governed and depends on their collective opinions to hold leaders’ feet to the fire. The only way that is going to happen is for informed citizens to make knowledgeable decisions as they vote, participate in civic engagement and talk about the issues of the day with family, friends and neighbors.

Critical thinking enables voters to:

* Evaluate candidates and policies by analyzing their actual platforms, track records, and campaign promises, rather than being swayed by rhetoric or superficial appeals.
* Understand complex issues by breaking them down into bite size chunks and consider their potential causes and consequences.
* Distinguish fact from opinion by Identifying misleading information, false claims, propaganda, and logical fallacies in political discourse and media.
* Learn and practice techniques of media savviness.
* Hold leaders’ feet to the fire on fulfilling their promises and duties by voting against them if they do not.
* Question authority when appropriate. Policies and politicians are sometimes not what they seem. Good citizens can spot abuses of power, recognize inconsistencies, breaches of trust and potential threats to democratic principles.
* Be able to use constructive public discourse and engage in respectful debate and discussion without emotional arguments or personal attacks.
* Search for common ground and solutions that benefit the many rather than the few or just narrow self-interest.
* Challenge the status quo when it is required and know what is involved in constructive change.

If our democracy has enough critical thinkers, we will be able to avoid being sold down the river by crooked or politicians who are after power for its own sake. We will inoculate our political system with a serum that can detect propaganda and avoid manipulation. Best of all, we can protect our precious freedoms and rights and know when and how to take effective peaceful action to keep democracy vital.