**What Is a Democracy? A Simple Primer For The Thoughtful Citizen**By Jeffrey R. Orenstein, Ph.D.

The word "democracy" comes from the Greek words "demos" (people) and "kratos" (rule), literally meaning "rule by the people." It is a system of government where supreme power is vested in the people. At the heart of all forms of democracy is a critical and non-negotiable principle: popular sovereignty, the idea that ultimate authority resides with the people.

Most modern democracies are representative democracies. In these systems, people do not rule directly; instead, they elect representatives to make laws. These representatives are held accountable to public opinion through periodic free elections. The threat of removal from office if they enact unpopular policies ensures their responsiveness.

However, some modern democracies are hybrids. They have elected legislatures that make most decisions but also allow citizens to make direct decisions on important policy matters through national voting with binding results. Switzerland exemplifies such a system with frequent national referenda. Many other representative democracies allow a few binding policy votes on referenda, especially at the state and local levels, on issues like school taxes or marijuana use.

Beyond being a governing structure, democracy is an ideal that shapes societies. It protects individual freedoms and opportunities, empowering citizens to feel they ultimately determine their own destiny.

While "majority rule" (fifty percent plus one) is central to democracy, some democracies modify this principle by requiring "extraordinary majorities," such as two-thirds, for certain issues. While this slows down hasty decision-making, it also grants minorities a de facto veto power over majority decisions, which is not an ideal democratic practice. Many democracies also counterbalance majority rule with guarantees of "minority rights," limiting majority power. Most democracies strive for a balance of majority sovereignty by putting certain rights—like freedom of speech, press, and assembly—off-limits to avoid what the American founders feared: the "tyranny of the majority."

Several key features define a functioning democracy. Free and fair elections are paramount, ensuring all eligible citizens have the right to vote and that their votes are counted accurately. These elections must be competitive, offering real choices among different candidates and parties and potentially resulting in the removal of an unpopular government. Another cornerstone is the "rule of law," which means everyone, including leaders, is subject to democratically enacted laws. Western democratic experience has led to the widespread guarantee of fundamental civil liberties, such as freedom of speech, assembly and religion. Most Western democracies also prevent power abuse by creating an independent judiciary and guaranteeing press freedom to act as checks on government power, holding leaders accountable and ensuring transparency.

However, democracy is not a spectator sport; it requires active participation from its citizens. Beyond simply casting a ballot, civic engagement is crucial for a healthy democracy. This can take many forms: staying informed about political issues, engaging in respectful debate, volunteering in the community, advocating for causes, contributing to campaigns or even running for office. An informed citizenry is the bedrock of a healthy democracy, enabling citizens to understand issues, evaluate candidates and policies and hold the government accountable. When citizens are engaged, the government is more likely to reflect the will and needs of the people.

Although democracy offers immense benefits, such as greater stability, adaptability and the promotion of human rights, it is not without its challenges. Decision-making can sometimes be slow due to the need for consensus and compromise. It also demands a commitment to tolerance and respect for differing viewpoints. Yet, its inherent strength lies in its ability to self-correct and evolve through peaceful means. When mistakes are made or policies fail, citizens have the power to change their leaders and direction through the ballot box, rather than through violent upheaval. As Prime Minister Winston Churchill said to his parliament in 1947, "Democracy is the worst system ever invented, except for all the others."

While the core idea of "rule by the people" is simple, the practical implementation of democracy can be complex and varies across countries. There is no single "perfect" democracy and different democratic systems balance various principles and priorities. However, the fundamental commitment to the will of the people and the protection of their rights remains at its heart in the U.S. and elsewhere.